



Municipal Library,  
NAINI TAL.



Class No. 942.58

Book No. M 27 F





FRONT TO BACK

*By the same author*

ROUND THE WORLD IN A BABY AUSTIN

LITTLE WHEELS

TAHITI DAYS

HOW TO LIVE AT THE FRONT

*etc.*

# FRONT TO BACK

*by*

HECTOR MACQUARRIE



*With an Introduction by*  
NORA WALN

JONATHAN CAPE  
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE  
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1941

JONATHAN CAPE LTD. 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON  
AND 91 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO

Durga Sah Municipal Library,  
Mysore

ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಸರ್ಕಾರಿ ಮಹಿಳೆ  
ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ

Class No. (F. 101) ... 2 (5) .....

Book No. (3. 17) ... 11. 11. 11. ....

Received On. ....

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD  
AT THE ALDEN PRESS  
PAPER BY SPALDING & HODGE LTD.  
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN & CO. LTD.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
PREFACE	13
PART ONE	
AUTUMN 1939	19
PART TWO	
WINTER 1939-1940	79
PART THREE	
SPRING 1940	119
PART FOUR	
SUMMER 1940	193
PART FIVE	
AUTUMN 1940	235



## INTRODUCTION

WHEN Hector MacQuarrie telephoned from London asking me to write an introduction to this book, I answered that I would be pleased to oblige him. He thanked me. Then I inquired as to how soon I could expect a copy of the manuscript.

To my astonishment he replied that he did not want me to read his work until after its publication. I felt disturbed and begged him to understand that I couldn't recommend a book I hadn't studied, not even one from his pen. It would be false.

'Of course it would,' his voice came cheerfully along the wire. 'Of course it would. But I am not asking you to recommend my book. You can say you haven't read *Front to Back*. You can condemn the author and his other works. I want you to write my introduction because nearly all introductions are more bland than honest. What you write will be honest.'

I rose to the bait of his flattery. 'All right,' I promised. 'I will write a foreword which you can use or reject.'

'Agreed,' said he as we were cut off. Emergency calls rightly have priority on telephone wires in wartime England, and one of my neighbours had located in her field a bomb for which our Air Raid Precaution Squad were searching. She must get through to the reporting centre.

I went to the field to have a look. It was a time bomb with, it was confidently alleged, a clock on its face, set at eleven. All of us gathered there were still discussing which 11 o'clock it meant when the Bomb Disposal Unit arrived and asked us to leave while they dealt with the bomb. I passed through our village. There men had almost

## INTRODUCTION

finished mending the three cottages set afire the previous week by a shower of incendiary bombs. Near-by the first underground shelter ever needed in the village's long history I loitered, admiring the tiny country church. It was marked by smoke, yet its proud Norman tower stood square and sturdy as ever.

Autumn called me to stay out of doors, so I went on to the lake in a wood not far off. On a log by the water's edge I watched wild duck swimming. They appeared unconcerned about the war, and I pondered as to what Hector MacQuarrie had written. He had said on the telephone that I was not to read his manuscript until after publication. Knowing him as I do, I realized that coaxing would not break his resolution. Therefore I put the thought of the book itself aside, and planned what I should write about its author. Out of my knowledge I have selected what I imagine readers might want to know.

He is a Celt, with a Celtic temperament. He is of Highland Scots ancestry, born in New Zealand. From his early youth he has travelled widely in unconventional ways, penetrating into nearly all lands, and has written interesting books about his adventures. He has survived many hardships, and never speaks of any of them without a trace of gaiety.

His book *How to Live at the Front*, to which this *Front to Back* is a companion, tells of his soldiering in 1914-18. In addition to fighting at the Front, he came to the United States during the last war, a member of the British War Mission. He spent some of this time in Philadelphia; but I, a Quaker maid brought up to the tradition that war is not a Christian enterprise, did not meet him. I merely passed these young British officers sometimes, and saw the attractiveness which other young American girls told me about!

Hector MacQuarrie became known to me only after I

## INTRODUCTION

had married an Englishman and come to England. I had already published my book *The House of Exile* with Angus and Robertson of Sydney, and he called on me as their London representative. It was he who attended to all the business part of their publication of my second book *Reaching for the Stars*. All my dealings with him have been such as to cement my already warm relationship with that far away publishing house in Sydney that I have never seen except through my imagination. In business I have never met anyone nicer to work with. Since business is the occupation of most men, I have the habit of judging a man personally by how he is in such dealings.

Aside from this I have come to know him socially. He has visited at our country house, and we have been to his Tudor farm-house in the Vale of Aylesbury. There he lives comfortably and carefully, as bachelors often do, attended by a faithful servant. His living-room was formerly the farm-house kitchen. Its lovely tiles bear the imprint of many feet, whose passing has marked them with a pattern of life truly beautiful. On these tiles Hector MacQuarrie has laid old Persian rugs. Their soft colours go well with the floor. The low ceilinged room is dominated by an immense fireplace with inglenooks on either side. Before the lights are lit, when the flames of the fire flicker, one can almost see the English people who have been there; and it is easy to think of past years when country men warmed themselves while women were busy preparing meals.

Rows and rows of books now line the wainscot. A great sofa and chairs, covered with faded chintz, welcome visitors to a comfortable seat, and Hector MacQuarrie's old English servant lays tea on a generous sized gate-legged table, which stands behind the sofa. She lays a goodly meal which does credit to a country farm-house, resolutely putting out of the way any less important things such as ink and paper. When

## INTRODUCTION

tea is ready Mimi, the Persian cat, comes out of the shadows as the candles and oil lamps are lit, waiting for her saucer of milk. Then, almost as if a bell had been rung for them, his Scots terriers, Sandy and Jane, appear at the garden window expecting to be let in.

I have not been told whether Hector MacQuarrie wrote *Front to Back* at this farm-house or at his flat in London, but here, except for the drone of warplanes and the occasional fall of bombs, when the curtains are drawn there certainly is an atmosphere which seems far from the thought of war. Yet like every other part of England, in this conflict his Tudor farm-house is in the front line.

I realize that Hector MacQuarrie feels deeply about the present madness which is afflicting humanity. He is a Briton. He firmly believes that Britons are leading a Crusade which can destroy evil. After four years of life among the Germans I know that humans everywhere must be free of the thrall of Nazidom. Bred of a long line of Quakers and then attracted to Confucian reasoning, many questions are puzzling me to-day. Hector MacQuarrie is sincere. Because of his sincerity I look forward to reading this book which I introduce.

I hope that in common with his other readers I shall find there truths which will help us all.

NORA WALN

## P R E F A C E

THIS book was begun in January 1940, being revised and completed as it progressed. Except for one or two literary corrections, it has not been touched since. The final chapters, of course, were written recently. This will explain why opinions held during the earlier chapters are modified, or abandoned as untenable, later. It seemed best to risk the danger of 'dating' in order to maintain a record of impressions held by an ordinary Briton during the first year of the war.

HECTOR MACQUARIE

Meadle  
Bucks.  
*December 1940*



*To*

*MARGARET LADY MOIR*  
*O.B.E.*

*A souvenir of thirty years' friendship*



P A R T   O N E

A U T U M N   1 9 3 9



## CHAPTER I

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death . . .

*Revelation, vi, 8*

APART from a surprising ability to get crossword puzzles nearly right, the literary capacity of my country housekeeper, Martha, is limited. 'It's fine,' she said, when I read over to her the first two chapters (since jettisoned) of this book. 'It sounds so 'igh class!'

Which, I think, shows critical agility.

Martha added, 'You can see what you mean when you get to the end'.

Martha, incidentally, was my own personal problem immediately before the war began. She does not believe in war; and there are no arguments which will convince her that a resort to war, even by the victims of aggression, is a good thing. Although, like many other really efficient English servants of her period — she is in the mid-fifties — Martha is a shocking snob who can pick bounders instantly; she is often rather garrulously the champion of the working people led into war, she says, by 'this rotten Government'. 'This rotten Government' is a general phrase always used by Martha when she mentions the party in power.

Up to the last moment of peace, she had been certain that 'the people' would prevent war. Eventually, when she could freely admit that Mr. Chamberlain, whom she admires very much and whom she has conveniently detached from 'this rotten Government', is a man of peace, most

## FRONT TO BACK

uneager to lead the British people into war, she became certain that 'the people' of Germany would refuse to fight. Finally, and this was immediately after Hitler's last speech in the Reichstag before his invasion of Poland, she disturbed me very seriously at dinner by shouting, as she left for the kitchen, 'I'm neutral — that's what I am — neutral!'

I was not in the mood to accept Martha's declaration of neutrality with the patience her devotion and excellent cooking have certainly earned. I was annoyed and disheartened. All my eloquent week-end propaganda in the farm-house had failed.

'How,' I asked coldly when she returned with the pudding, 'can a British woman remain neutral?'

I became a little shrill as I re-explained the situation, adding that I might not be able to retain in my home a British woman who remained — neutral! I gave the word emphasis with a mild kind of snarl in it worthy of Lord Haw-Haw. This shook Martha.

'Well, sir,' she said quietly; and I knew that courage was ebbing before aggression; 'we say all the time that we want peace and we arm to the teeth; and the Germans say all the time that they want peace, and they arm to the teeth. You can't believe anything, and . . .' There were tears in her eyes, showing the unkindness of my cut; because Martha is a sad and lonely woman, and the farm-house is her only home. As usual, the man was the brute; and saw it!

I decided not to discuss the political situation with Martha again; and the subject remained strictly taboo until immediately after Mr. Chamberlain's broadcast speech that first Sunday morning when the war began for Britain. She had been listening to the broadcast in her kitchen where she has a small radio. She came into the farm-house living-room where I stood in an aura of emotion, and announced shortly, 'It is now clear, sir; that 'Err 'Itler is *not* a gentleman!'

Having delivered this, Martha's most deadly broadside, she instantly withdrew.

I have had no further trouble on the Home Front.

Opinion in the village inn, where I spend more time than I should trying to master the game of darts, was, at first, hard to understand: notably on that last Saturday night of peace in Britain.

These are Bucks people; and the people of Buckinghamshire have characteristics peculiar to themselves. They are not active protestants so much as quiet rubber-like rebels against anything they suspect as being against the interests of the community.

They are difficult people to know. No amount of charm, personality, nor anything else for that matter, will seduce them into giving friendship until time has strengthened an attraction, or modified an initial distaste. They might be called incurable snobs by the less discerning because they persist in believing that a gentleman of birth is certain to be a friendly soul no matter how effectively he tries to disguise this fact, and that his actions are bound to be guided by the strictest sense of honour. Exceptions are admitted, but are not permitted to affect the general opinion that when you're dealing with a 'proper gentleman' you have nothing to suspect. Nevertheless, the gentry are not able to mould village opinion to any marked degree and, to do them justice, they do not bother to make the attempt.

As a Colonial, I am a rover in the social game, of the genus only invented within the last hundred or two years and not yet fixed and graded. Nevertheless, it has taken my neighbours upwards of six years to accept me in the inn from where, incidentally, one can see the lovely old church in which John Hampden called a meeting of the local gentlemen to resist the payment of Ship Money.

As a further digression, I might add that while there is

## FRONT TO BACK

not now one Quaker living within many miles of my farmhouse, quite a big meadow in the centre of the village contains the bones of many Friends whose bodies were brought there for burial. The village was a Quaker centre when the Friends first met to 'worship Him in spirit and in truth'. It might not be untrue to say that the ancestors of many Pennsylvanians rest in Meadlc, their graves now unmarked, and only faintly discernible during unusually dry summers when the pastures are dry.

On the whole, I could expect my dart partners and opponents who come to the inn on Saturday nights to think independently.

It was soon apparent that they had decided to fight Germany. At the same time, they realized that she would 'take a deal o' fighting'. An apparent determination not to permit destructive hate to affect them was shown when some farmers told pleasant stories of the German prisoners who had worked for them during the last war. It was said, and accepted as truth by farm labourers in the tap room, that these Germans were much better workers than our own men. Germany's pact with Russia had given my inn friends cold feet, I thought; and more than one expressed gloom, painting alarming pictures of the disasters before us.

'Of course,' they would remark without much confidence; 'we shall win — in the end.'

I took a much more hopeful view and expressed it, forcibly; but there was no evidence that I had been convincing in the reply — 'Well, I'll be glad if you're right, sir, and I am wrong.'

I tried to point out in sufficiently simple terms that such a retort marked the pessimist, an unhelpful citizen when the country was at war.

I was alarmed. Evidently the hearts of these Englishmen were not in the struggle. How then dare we fight a powerful

and uncompromising enemy? It is the people of Great Britain who win British wars.

I found myself being accused of underrating 'the German military machine', a phrase which had leapt more than twenty years without hurt and now bobbed up with an awful and depressing freshness; and although the argument wandered hither and yon as arguments will wander in village inns, it still seemed clear to me that my country neighbours regarded the imminent war with distaste and probably fear.

I became frightened myself. Why could we not go on being the great British Empire without question, and without test. How unthinkable the thought of losing. Haughty Germans might even invade London; and how then could a Briton live? New Zealand, the land of my birth and once my home — Australia and South Africa, and all the colonies throughout the world — what must be their fate?

We of the Dominions have long taken our freedom for granted, our freedom to experiment politically, hardly aware that no failure could be fatal with the Old Country always ready and able to lend a polite hand — free to laugh at what seemed to us English affectation as we contrasted our own virility with English weediness and silly old ways; and yet, saving grace, hiding our pride in the Old Country's courage, and loving her very deeply in our secret hearts. The Dominions might endure a little independent life after the destruction of the Empire's heart; but the prospect must be terrible.

We are, admittedly, proud of our Empire because of its size; the fact that so much of the world on our maps is coloured pink cannot fail to satisfy us; but we love the Empire because British rule to-day stands for freedom for all, tempered by deep understanding and sympathy. There may be cads and bounders misusing authority in odd places

## FRONT TO BACK

where natives are inarticulate; I could quote examples myself; but the impulse from Whitehall is generous and only the best is offered when the best is known.

And now on this night of September 2nd, 1939, we were about to risk the fate of the greatest Empire the world has known. Could not this test be postponed, or evaded? Something might happen to Hitler in the meantime. Is he, an upstart — an hysterical false prophet leading the German people into the wilderness — enough to force the test?

All this rushed quickly through my mind in that inn before I said, 'I am not underrating the German military machine — I merely hold that we are right, and cannot lose.'

'Oh, we shall win all right — in the end,' said a man near me; 'it's between now and winning which is going to be pretty hard.'

'You mark my words,' said an older man apparently a few days behind with the news; 'you mark my words, we'll be at war within a day or two!'

'Within a day or two . . . !' I exclaimed.

I noticed that most men in the tap room shared my amazement; but before I could add that we were probably now at war, that not to be at war within hours would spell disgrace and dishonour, I was interrupted by a well-dressed man who came from the saloon bar and took the stage for a few minutes.

We were all a little startled when the well-dressed man said forcefully and incisively, 'There will be no war!'

The remark, made even a day or two earlier, could have been unimportant. Its implications that Saturday night were vital. It soon had the truly comforting effect of letting me read the hearts and minds of my tap room friends.

What I had read as distaste and fear were neither. Much less informed than myself, their judgment was sounder — instinctively so, perhaps; because they, humble enough,

carry in their day the British tradition that a broken word breaks the breaker. Also, I soon read, they, a tiny segment of the British people, would no longer be led by any statesman along a pathway whose only attraction was a finger-post with Safety First writ large on it.

They were disturbed, as all of us were in Britain that night, by the delay in Whitehall between the invasion of Poland and our Declaration of War. Chamberlain disciples to a man, they knew that he thought as they felt. They feared that behind the delay there lay hidden some awful danger which he sought to avoid.

I found myself powerfully supported when I turned on the well-dressed man, and said, 'What d'you mean — there'll be no war? It has probably been declared already.'

The well-dressed man laughed cynically.

'It has not; and it will not!' he shouted contemptuously; 'Old Chamberlain won't take the jump; he'll find some kind of an easy gate to creep through. He has never wanted to fight; he has never meant to fight, and he will *not* fight.'

He went on confidently, maddeningly repeating — 'You wait and see. Old Chamberlain won't fight. Why has he been waiting? The Poles are being licked; nothing can save them now. Old Chamberlain will regret the *fait accompli*, and make peace.'

I am certain that many of my retorts shocked my neighbours who are naturally courteous; but they remained my allies. Soon it was as clear as day that while they obviously feared the effects of a declaration of war against Germany, they knew that the threat of countless millions of Russians joining millions of Germans to answer that challenge, could not modify in any way the fact that we had no choice. There was no choice before the England of our inn that Saturday night. Even with the certainty of defeat before us, we must march.'

## FRONT TO BACK

I shall have given a totally wrong impression if I have shown a picture of determined English farming folk clenching their fists and looking very serious indeed. The argument raged while some of us were playing darts and others deep in cribbage; and with it there ran the usual light back-chat which accompanies the former game much to the annoyance of the crib players. Only the well-dressed man, expressing so seriously the most superficial of thoughts, appeared grim and sardonic.

Perhaps we had found him tedious; possibly he had given form to our own fear which loyalty to Mr. Chamberlain had repressed; I know that after a time, the dart board, usually the centre of much interest until players are ordered from the inn at ten o'clock, was deserted; and the cribbage cards left idle on the table.

When the well-dressed man had gone I was able to express the inn's feeling when I said quietly, 'If he doesn't declare war, our good name is lost, and we are beaten . . .'

The landlady, with few ideas unconfined by the inn and her family, a dear, comely soul, made something of a sally forth into all the conflicting thought in Britain that night when she said to me, 'You're quite right! I hate war — but we can't go on like this' — and in many words she expressed what Mr. Chamberlain said in few, '*Il faut en finir!*' — this can be endured no longer.

In deep depression I marched the odd mile back to the farm-house, always a pleasant little journey after the smoke-laden, heated atmosphere of the inn, with Sandy and Jane and Mimi, the last-named an absurd cat who thinks she's a dog like the Scotties. But Sandy and Jane and Mimi, always mentioned in that order and in that way, were largely ignored by their friend on that lovely night with Mars red and prominent in a sky blazing with stars.

I thought the situation over carefully as I saw it. I know

the Hitler of *Mein Kampf*; I can understand, and appreciate, all the courage in the man; in the light of his achievements, his undoubted powers of leadership, is it not simple, even absurd, to dismiss him as an hysterical maniac? Nor can one entirely accept the assertion, often made, that he is an evil man. Given a rifle with Hitler as a target, I should not hesitate; but in sizing up his character as I see it, I should be bound to admit much that is admirable, even magnificent. There is something exciting in the contrast between the humble corporal son of old Schicklgruber of 1918 and the Fuehrer of 1937 and 1938 to whose words the whole world listened with bated breath; and one can feel this despite the thought that there must be much which is despicable and revolting in a world searching, in vain, for comfort from the ex-corporal's flood of eloquent contradictions and naive inconsistencies.

What is so striking about Hitler is that, despite the obvious contradictions in his statements, surely seen instantly by those who follow him and apparently trust him without question, that despite his lack of information and obvious ignorance, his peasant naivety — all the thousand and one shortcomings which those of even average education can detect; he has been the great leader of a great people. Wholly bad, without some wholesome even noble characteristics, could he lead even the German people for more than a week?

There are, I know, other explanations of Hitler's rise; I am aware, too, that for one good word said on his behalf a thousand might be written with justice in condemnation; but wholly to condemn so amazing a personality is to make an admission which I am not humble enough to make.

Like an arrow he has flown towards his target. The compelling truth he sees in his mission, to lead the German people to the highest peak in this world, has blinded him

## FRONT TO BACK

to the less obvious dangers of the ascent. Surmounted and crossed, dangerous crags and crevasses are forgotten in the glory of the summit so nearly reached.

Hitler lied to Mr. Chamberlain, and thereby displaced, I think, what seemed a few cubic inches of turf, unaware, as he shouted *Excelsior!* that he had started an avalanche.

'And whomsoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.'

Fully alive to the fact that, without dragging them in by the neck, Britain and Mr. Chamberlain cannot be made to fit into the parable of the householder which planted a vineyard, I have yet never been able to contemplate the Prime Minister's visits to Hitler without recalling that parable and the passage, 'But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.'

Evidently, it could not have seemed important to Hitler to deceive a middle-class English gentleman from Birmingham apparently, only apparently, seeking peace at any price — coming so humbly to the court of the ex-corporal — symbolic, if Hitler could have read the event correctly, of English understatement. Hitler must have been unaware that Mr. Chamberlain was acting much less as the Prime Minister of Great Britain than as a simple Christian in supreme authority with no choice but to follow the dictates of his Master — that in a task so great, so momentous for countless mothers and fathers and for those whose hearts bleed when young men are killed, having as its object the saving of the world from war and all that war can mean, no sacrifice of pride, or of anything else, was too great, that no opportunity dare be missed.

The betrayal of the Czechs! The rape of Austria! All the rest of it — now a tedious story!

There was indeed a mistake made at Munich — a great and fateful one — made by the brilliant Hitler.

Had he accepted in all sincerity, with all its implications, the kindly hand offered to him at Munich, he could have saved his regime, probably his life; a happy and prosperous, even a powerful, Germany was not repugnant to Mr. Chamberlain, and behind him were the British people. The vision was splendid; and with all the people of Europe eager for peace, far from inconceivable — Europe as a Society of Nations, gradually abandoning the steel corsets of intense nationalism, co-operating for the common good of the common people.

I have sometimes imagined Hitler, said to be a man of great decisions, turning to Mr. Chamberlain and saying, 'Our next meeting, soon, will be in London. I shall come to you.'

Then would have been won a magnificent victory; and a peace celebration free of pain which would have smashed all the bells of London and rendered the people hoarse in cheering the man we now seek to destroy.

Hitler might have lied to Churchill, to Lloyd George, even to Asquith and been forgiven, or understood: but when he lied to Chamberlain, he made for himself a relentless enemy who will never let go.

Mr. Chamberlain failed at Munich; but he made no mistake. He won the first, and what doubtless will prove to be the decisive, round in what has proved to be an inevitable combat. He walked, I think, with God; we, the common British people, were behind him then; we remained behind him throughout 1938, and we were behind him on September 3rd, 1939.

We, the ordinary British people, feel, perhaps, more than we think; and we think with minds uncluttered by a wealth of information not relevant to simple facts. To us Mr. Chamberlain is not a particularly attractive figure, neither picturesque nor stimulating to any degree. We believe

## FRONT TO BACK

him to be a good man, literally so; we think, too, that he is a wise man, perhaps a man of good common sense rather than one of great wisdom; and we believe that the situation in Europe, if it is to be solved effectively, demands a rigidly simple treatment rather than a brilliant, or glamorous attack.

A brilliant genius led us to victory in the last war; and where are we now?

And so I marched home to the farm-house that night, with Mimi creeping along like a small tiger at my heels; and as I walked, my mind cleared of many doubts. Many people in England may recall the serene beauty of that night. Mars was red and menacing; but there were many, many more stars.

I must trust Mr. Chamberlain, I knew. The right thing would be done.

And the right thing was done next morning: it will remain the right thing whatever the result.

## CHAPTER II

My personal experience of evacuation has been slight. Like all people living in the country within easy reach of London, I had been duly warned to prepare to accept evacuees. The notification was firm, even grim, seeming to suggest that some of us might try to dodge this responsibility. Personally, I regarded the prospect as rather exciting, a feeling I tried to communicate to Martha without any success whatever. The alarming picture she drew showed an invasion of gigantic fleas, lice and bugs with three minute children bringing up the rear. However, she accepted the situation in the light of a war mortification, expressing a preference for bombs, and marched to the neighbouring town where she bought baths, basins and pitchers; leaving a big order for insect powders and disinfectants.

Our three children were expected on Friday, September 1st; but when I reached the farm-house from London that evening they had not arrived. Martha was greatly relieved; but a sally out into the village to collect gossip after dinner produced the news that we were due to receive two mothers, each with two young children the next day, Saturday.

This information, which we received with 'modified rapture', had the effect of forcing us to alter our domestic geography. Martha, who lives above her kitchen with a separate staircase at one end of the house, agreed with well-bred diffidence that she might still maintain the grim isolation she likes if she were moved to the guest room at the other end of the top floor, thus leaving her big room and the centre room adjoining for the mothers and children. This would be a convenient arrangement since it gave the

## FRONT TO BACK

mothers and children an exit to the garden and an entrance to the kitchen well away from my end of the house.

I was prepared to be quite charming to the mothers and children in a middle-aged bachelorly way; but fearing that they might not be happy if I found them on top of me, I shut off my own two rooms with powerful bolts and locks.

The centre upstairs room would make a fine general living-room. For centuries, probably, it had been the *belle chambre* of the farm-house; where children had been born, and where farmers and their wives had slept and died. It is served apart from the dark passage leading to Martha's room and her staircase, by a narrow winding staircase leading from the great living-room, a staircase so dangerous and treacherous in the narrowness and unevenness of its steps that guests must be warned lest they die of broken necks literally in their tracks.

Old local people who call occasionally never fail to wag their heads when they contemplate that staircase, remarking 'A turrible staircase fur a coffin, that there be, sir! Wurst in the district!'

My waking impression that Saturday morning was that of being on board a liner making ready to sail at dawn. I sensed the creaking of pumps, the whirr of dynamos and other preparatory movements in the vitals of the ship; with odd thuds and trampings towards the after-end. This was Martha, preparing for the mothers and children.

She did not appear during breakfast; and it was not until nearly eleven that I dared to venture upstairs.

The place was in a wild state of confusion with odd disintegrated bedsteads and cots ready to advance or retire at the will of their commander. This confused condition is usual with Martha when she leads a revolution, and there has never been any question regarding her ability to emerge with success; but when I now glanced at her, I became

seriously alarmed. Her weather-beaten and healthy skin had assumed the shade of a slightly bleached lemon, and I gained the impression as she staggered about that her joints were badly in need of lubrication. It was obvious that she must shortly become a casualty.

My first thought was to rush forth to the good woman in the village responsible for the distribution of the mothers and children, to urge her to spare us. I could not, I could not compete with two mothers with young children in the farm-house, with the bedsteads all undone and Martha bilious or worse.

I ordered her to lie down instantly. 'On the floor — anywhere, but lie down!' I begged when she pointed to the disintegrated bedsteads.

So many weird things seem to happen to women one way and another that to avoid embarrassment I am always diffident about asking for symptoms unless these are quickly offered. Martha sensed my difficulty and smiled faintly, shaking her head wildly when I said I would immediately telephone for a doctor.

'An egg, sir!' she whispered hoarsely; 'I 'ad one for breakfast—thing I never do; they never agree with me; but I felt I needed strength this day.'

'I shall be all right, shortly — very shortly,' said Martha and staggered through the dark passage to the centre room whence immediately came stifled sounds of a most unattractive kind.

An hour later, she was her own valiant self.

I decided to motor to the station to watch the mothers and children detrain, possibly to collect my own, even to select if this proved possible.

The absence of any kind of fuss at the station was remarkable. A large shed had been turned into a reception room, and was now served by three or four uniformed

## FRONT TO BACK

women who did not appear to be either busy or harassed, although the first train with hundreds of evacuees was already signalled. It seemed to me that the prospect of feeding, perhaps washing, and preparing to disperse some hundreds of mothers and children throughout the district should have inspired much more liveliness.

On the station approach were a dozen immense motor coaches with their drivers and conductors chatting together in complete relaxation; and even on the platform itself the few odd men and women in uniform with a sprinkling of boy scouts showed no particular interest. Two or three local citizens beautifully clad in the blue and silver of the auxiliary police gave a touch of martial splendour; but otherwise the whole proceeding lacked atmosphere.

Even the train drew in without any warning whistle; but almost imperceptibly the men and women on the platform had taken up positions at regular intervals down its length. The compartment doors opened instantly, and from these emerged many large mothers and many children, of all ages and sizes, all well dressed, all clutching brown paper parcels, evidently containing their morning's ration supplemented for the children with much fruit and some candy, a good deal of the latter clinging to the faces of the smaller children. Some young boys immediately went to the slot machines and drew forth packets of chocolate after the appropriate coin had been dropped in, giving one the impression that as far as they were concerned this was the chief use of railway stations.

For a few moments, the mothers and children remained in an uneven kind of line following the length of the train, curiously quiet and unconcerned for Londoners, without any attempt to move off. Evidently an order was given, or understood; but it seemed to me that some hidden machinery had been set in motion when the long procession

began moving along the platform, over the bridge to the other platform and eventually out to the station approach where it passed the string of motor coaches and was lost to view in the large reception shed.

I had joined a small group of more seriously involved mothers, helping them to carry suit-cases and other packages, and thus formed part of the steady flow; perfectly disciplined apparently, but unaware of any pressure.

Although the London mothers submitted without demur or complaint, they retained, and used, the right of general comment as they marched; and anyone who knows London mothers, London grandmothers, or even London great-grandmothers of the poorer classes will quickly believe that the exchange of remarks — 'chipping' — was not seriously affected by anything Hitler promised to do to them.

People from abroad, notably from the Dominions, who have not always closely examined the back-yards of their own bigger cities, are often shocked by the crowded and unsavoury conditions under which many of our London people live. 'What have they to fight for?' is a terrible question which I heard once asked by a Canadian officer. We admit the shame of it; and it is true that until this war started, and even while it is in progress, we were making, and continue to make as far as possible, every effort to remove this stain from London's civic reputation. I, who know the London poor well, having picked hops with them in the autumn, and gathered strawberries with them in springtime on the great fruit farms, thus seeing more of them than I saw from my college settlement in Battersea; I dare to hope that the cure of the disease will not be fatal to the Londoner's infectious *joie de vivre*, his (more often her) glorious ability to draw fun from every minute of every drab day. You may be bored stiff at the Ritz, at the Savoy, at Claridges, hiding your awful gloom with a fatuous smile as

## FRONT TO BACK

the minutes pass slowly to the moment of escape when, at last, the band plays the National Anthem; but I defy anyone to be anything else but hilariously delighted if he is lucky enough to be received with trust by a gang of East London men and women. What defcats me is the sometimes almost obvious fact that one's companions in the West End are suffering with equal poignancy at their parties, and they have everything, while the East Enders have often little, or nothing.

My three women, averaging the age of about thirty, had evidently decided to regard their evacuation in the light of an elopement from their husbands. Even as they played out this little comedy I caught a vision of the three husbands back in London smiling in appreciation; and I think the women enjoyed the same vision. One of them, a rather thin vixenish looking woman of the Susan Nipper type, startled me by forcing me into the comedy as her guilty partner in the elopement. To the delight of her companions she asked, coyly, if she might call me 'Orris' — a highly embarrassing question, not merely because the name of Horace has never appealed to me. However, any objection I might have raised — it would not have helped me — would have been quickly drowned because with feminine in consequence they suddenly began painting lively pictures of their homes without themselves to wash up the dishes.

'Unless,' said Susan Nipper, 'they find girl friends to 'elp.'

'Well,' said another in a reasonable tone, 'the poor blokes might as well 'ave a bribe; they've 'ad us a long time!'

This subject was dismissed when we began drifting along the station approach — a rather sad pilgrimage it now seemed.

'I've often seen refugees trailing along at the pitchers,' sighed Susan; 'but I never thought I would be one myself — never! Not in England,' she added.

This, however, was the only serious remark made. Perhaps the remark, with its implications, was much too serious, exposing what must be hidden, the well enough founded fear that all might not continue to be well with the people of England. The general effect was an alarming increase of gaiety, claiming me as victim when the three of them began flirting desperately, refusing to admit Susan's prior claim of discovery.

'I fahnd 'im, standing there on the station all forlorn and lonely,' said Susan; 'and I gave him a nice posh nime. Ain't that so, 'Orris?' urged Susan turning to me with much appeal in her bright dark eyes.

At this moment we were passing my car parked near the kerb. It has a very long bonnet which covers one's feet and, incidentally, the engine; and it is a very smart-looking little car with an air of speed and efficiency not always borne out by its performance.

It fascinated Susan Nipper who, apparently forgetting her first love, remarked: 'I think I'll get to know the bloke wot owns that car; just do nicely for the two of us of an evening . . .' and turning to me, 'D'you know 'im, 'Orris?'

I admitted that I did, rather well; adding that he was an elderly gent and not much of an oil painting when it came to looks.

'All the better!' screamed the women in chorus; 'all the better — just the kind we like.'

'Now be a pal, 'Orris,' urged Susan; 'and give us an intro!'

One of the women, more quiet than the others and much better looking, was a big, pleasantly plump blonde, with a soft clear skin of truly charming colour and with large blue kindly eyes. She was holding in her arms a plump, blonde baby, with a soft clear skin, and with large blue placid eyes, while attached to her hand was a small girl of five with the same attractive colouring and with the same large blue eyes.

## FRONT TO BACK

The entire little family were dressed in gay flowered silk of precisely the same pattern, not expensive silk, I should think; most probably it was artificial silk; but the general effect was gay and a thought unruly without being untidy. I approved of the blonde woman with a barely formed reservation that she might eventually lose control of her figure and bulge at odd places. Still she seemed very clean; and behind her large blue eyes there was a certain strength and alertness which I felt might save her from the lovely jelly-fish stage. I felt that in her case the whole business of evacuation had been regarded as serious, that although she was determined to make the best of it, the parting from her home and husband had been hard to bear.

It occurred to me that I might annex this blonde family for the farm-house, until I realized that the difficulty of detaching Susan Nipper might prove too great. The thought of Susan calling me 'Orris' in the grim and awful presence of Martha was much too alarming.

As we passed one of the motor coaches, a driver strode quickly over and, ignoring more heavily laden mothers, instantly relieved the blonde mother of her blonde baby. The baby showed no objection, accepting the attention as perfectly natural, and offering reward by clutching the driver round the neck with its chubby little arms. The mother smiled charmingly.

The driver, a man in his early thirties I guessed, was tall, slim and splendidly built. He had, too, a very well-cut profile and dark handsome eyes; and was altogether a very attractive looking man.

He had merely murmured rather touchingly, and with undoubted truth, one knew, 'I'll carry her for you; I've got one of my own at home.'

This should have saved him from Susan Nipper, herself heavily laden with offspring. Her instant attack, possibly

not unconnected with the discernment shown by the driver in his charity, literally brought down the house although it was received by the victim with a disappointing lack of humour.

Susan had instantly stopped and the other woman, taking her cue, fell back in an attitude of horror while the blonde's agreeable expression was exchanged for one of awful resignation, relieved by the suspicion of a smile at the corner of her ripe, red lips.

'Ere we are,' Susan exclaimed in shrill shocked tones; 'three pore London women driven from our 'omes by 'Itler's bombs—'oping for peace and a little rest in the country, and first'—turning towards me as her dark eyes snapped—'it's 'Orris. And now,' gazing sternly at the handsome motor coach driver, 'it's Clarke Gable. Well, I never! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves — both of you!'

'Young man,' reproved the other woman in more reserved tones, 'wot would yer wife say if she saw yer with that biby in yer arms?'

'She'd say,' offered Susan, summing up, 'that it was yours. Shockin' I call it!'

The driver was obviously quite cross; but they showed him no mercy even when he protested again and again, and with dreadful seriousness, that he was a married man with a child of his own. Even the blonde remained non-committal and made no attempt to help him out. He was glad to escape when we reached the reception shed.

I had felt it my duty to prepare these women for their Bucks hostesses, many of whom I know and like immensely. The Bucks housewife enjoys life as well as most, but she seems to take pains to prevent any one from suspecting this. She tends to live inside her house; I have sometimes thought that if her home were mobile enough, she'd carry it about on her back like a hermit crab, popping out her head in safe

## FRONT TO BACK

moments. Those who do not know her might suspect that she is a thought bleached, mentally and physically. I think it is true that strangers find her shy and think she may be repressed. Her type is not uncommon in the country districts of most lands — another fact which defeats me when I find women living in sunless, crowded streets remaining alert and lively with skins showing excellent health.

My Cockney women friends listened courteously when I reduced the above to more appropriate language. They apparently caught my picture and gazed at me with a kindly, amused expression which seemed to say, 'He is a clever boy, really!'

But they refused to be either alarmed or impressed, offering me their own picture of what would happen. I saw them as crusaders on behalf of pale repressed women, boldly lifting the Bucks housewives out of themselves, and leading them all the way to a merry, careless kind of Hell. It was, to me, a startling picture of dead and bleached bones becoming alive, but not lively.

When the women had been safely shepherded to the reception shed, I motored back to the farm-house to warn Martha that the invasion was imminent. She, safely out of her muddle and presumably free of her egg, was now prepared for the worst.

But again the day passed, leaving us desolate and alone; a condition to which we could offer no honest objection.

Martha sallied forth again to reconnoitre after dinner, returning with the news that since the supply of billets was greater than the available mothers and children, they had decided to give us expectant mothers who would most certainly arrive the next day, Sunday.

This intimation embittered Martha who had had, she explained, some years' experience in a maternity hospital as a 'baby washer', an occupation hitherto unknown to me.

She had confidently hoped that this chapter in her life, which had evidently not amused her, had finally closed. While waiting at dinner, she related enough of her experience at the maternity hospital to force me to decide to abandon the farm-house until the expectant mothers had ceased to expect. I recalled newspaper stories of babies being born in lighthouses, even in motor coaches and aeroplanes when stout fellows had done all that was necessary, mothers and babies all doing well in consequence. As a midwife, I saw myself as a notable failure; nor could I see Martha, even with her experience, enjoying an outstanding success.

The question of the dangerous old staircases again arose; an expectant, and consequently physically unbalanced, mother simply could not negotiate either with perfect safety, even if there were enough room for her to ascend without dangerous squeezing. The expected might happen unexpectedly!

I thought of rushing to the home of the good woman responsible for the billeting in the village and pleading — 'Oh, Madam — d'you think you should send expectant mothers to the home of a middle-aged bachelor whose house-keeper is a spinster of fifty-five?' And if this had failed, I could have talked eloquently of the staircases. I could have shown her that expectant mothers in the farm-house might not be happy notwithstanding all our good intentions to do our duty by the country and its women in their hours of need.

Despite the fateful fact of the war declaration that Sunday and all that it meant, the sound of approaching motors invariably filled us with apprehension. Martha began anticipating bombs as well as babies with the chance of both synchronizing.

Again our fears proved groundless; and on the subject of evacuation I began to breathe more freely until my mind

## FRONT TO BACK

began to work through the series of threats which had, I admit it with some shame, disturbed a selfish way of life. They had ordered us to prepare for children, then for mothers and young children, and finally for expectant mothers. If the powers-that-be were following some kind of a plan, what might be their next move? Were they alarmed at a falling birth rate? Might they not now send a suitable female and order instant marriage? I did not confide this fear in Martha.

She, of course, had again gone out for news; but I decided not to be disturbed when she returned in great agitation to announce that they had decided to give us blind persons. 'And,' she added, 'if we don't get blind persons, we shall have 'opeless cripples.'

It seemed best to forget evacuees. If they came, they came; and we would struggle with them. If they did not come, we would be spared a war burden, consoling ourselves with the thought that we had been willing to do our duty which would have been nobly done, by Martha.

I regret to say that I saw nothing further of the three London mothers; their adventures are unknown to me since the stream of evacuation flowed rather away from my village which is too isolated to be convenient for the purpose, and too small to support a store or school. I do not think these women could have been very happy; and I feel fairly certain that they are now back in London ready to be slaughtered by the Germans when they think fit.

While we had escaped, others in the district had not; and soon the air rang with all kinds of gossip. Sir Arthur Aggar, in a letter to a London newspaper, recalled an item in his school book of Latin prose which he thought appropriate to these times. An earthquake had been predicted in ancient Athens which forced the Athenians to send their children to safe areas in the country. The

earthquake did not eventuate; and after a time the country people wrote to the city saying, 'Take back your children, and let us have your earthquake!'

My impression is that if all people possessed an understanding of, and patience with, children, the evacuation scheme would have offered little difficulty; and if, in addition, all of us could live well within our incomes instead of from hand to mouth, there would have been none. The scheme called for divine patience and slightly more than enough income to augment the necessarily modest allowance made by the Government.

I think there can be no doubt, too, that if the Nazis had decided to bomb our big cities at once, the scheme would have immediately proved successful. In a busy and bloody atmosphere of death and destruction, with buildings toppling on fleeing civilians — sewers bursting and ejecting rats (it has been said), water supplies being cut off, amidst all the awful possibilities of air raids on a grand scale — there would have been more time for charity and tenderness than for grumbling, and, of course, no anti-climax.

We all have our evacuation stories; we hear many more; but I think it safe to say that the pleasant stories far outweigh the unhappy.

I know of three elderly Scots spinsters who were landed with four wild Glasgow children with devastating effect on the spinsters and children when the smallest amount of intelligence on the part of the evacuation authorities would have saved both. On the other hand, I know of two young London boys who have literally changed the lives of a middle-aged couple in my neighbourhood. When this couple lost their only child a year or two ago, life had, apparently, ended for them; and even their house assumed an air of sorrow and disillusion. They, and the house, have changed; and I think they are happier than they have ever been.

## FRONT TO BACK

I met these two boys one Sunday afternoon when I was passing through their village with Sandy and Jane.

'Good afternoon, sir!' one said brightly, in a treble voice.

'Are you taking your dogs for a walk?' asked the other.

'Yes,' I said with equal brightness. 'Would you like to come too?'

'No thanks!' they replied with a rapid carelessness which put me in my place.

Meeting them a week or two later, I sought a little revenge by remarking in the tones of a schoolmaster, 'I think I shall have to send you both back to London next week.'

They stared at me in momentary consternation since my tones had not been sufficiently exaggerated to reassure them; but when I laughed, one of them said a little contemptuously, 'We are going back to London -- when Hitler dies!'

'And,' said the other, 'I hope he lives for ever.'

### C H A P T E R   I I I

BECAUSE the railway within a mile or two of the farm-house throws one up at Paddington at an inconvenient time in the morning, I avoid the inconvenience and tedium of leaping on to buses and diving into subways by motoring over the Chilterns to another railway whose trains pass under and across London to a point within walking distance of the office. The short seven mile motor journey through lovely English countryside has never lost charm throughout the years; but the same may not be said of the railway station I eventually reach each morning during the summer months.

As a railway station it is precisely like thousands of others throughout the land, architecturally insignificant — a soiled kind of entrance flanked by a ticket office and a dusty waiting room, a platform with a tobacco and cigarette kiosk served by a pleasant young female who chirps 'Good morning', a book-stall where one buys one's papers, and the long expanse of open platforms where a seat or two stand midst a successful enough attempt at gardening with crimson rambler roses and a bed or two of very hardy annuals.

This open expanse of platform, where the third class passengers wait for the train, has a peaceful atmosphere; it is the process of reaching it which is so disturbing during those few moments before the train draws in.

One has to pass along the covered part of the platform where the first class passengers stand in small groups.

There are so many of them; they are all so well turned out, and the motors which have brought them to the station are always so magnificent, and so perfectly tended by the

## FRONT TO BACK

chauffeurs in their smart liveries. The place has the unease and alarming atmosphere of the royal enclosure at Ascot. It is only the friendly salute and greeting always offered to all by the station master and porters who happen to be about which strengthens mere people even to pause in this elegant circle to buy their newspapers. There have been occasions when the book-stall attendant in fumbling for change has placed me in the awful position of keeping one of these great men waiting for his *Times*.

I have tried to analyse the effect created by these first class passengers on that station, but not satisfactorily. I have a good many well-to-do acquaintances who, presumably, travel first class on the railway; but they are pleasant, unassuming and not alarming; often regarding wealth as a confounded nuisance when it proves, as it so often does, an obstacle to a whole-hearted friendship with poor persons who can be delightful friends: an obstacle raised by the poor persons, of course.

These men on the station at eight-forty are always correctly turned out and never dressed with anything approaching exaggeration. One knows that their shoes have come from the best little West End shops and that they are polished with the best polish by the most efficient and respectable servants. They wear just the right kind of shirtings and ties, and quietly expensive hats with a general bias towards bowlers.

Occasionally, but very occasionally, women come with them; and although these are generally tweedy females wearing sensible hats with terribly clean faces, sharp noses and thin lips, sometimes there appears a perfectly lovely lady, exquisitely turned out as only a few English women of the more fortunate classes can dress.

It would be nice to say that underneath this truly awful façade of respectable elegance, pleasant, kindly hearts beat;

but people of the neighbourhood assure me that it merely tries to adorn incredible snobbishness.

These people have not, however, inspired me with any more definite emotion than a faint desire to throw stones through windows; not to hurt anyone, merely to enjoy even a temporary defeat of this invincible imperturbability which the sudden crash of glass might achieve.

They were all on that station as usual on the Monday morning of September 4th, 1939.

Nothing that Adolf Hitler might do could change them, I knew; our declaration of war, as a simple act of British duty, which was certain to affect their hearts in the loss of sons and brothers, and to attack their purses in the way that wars have; must be accepted calmly and no emotion shown.

The miracle had been wrought nevertheless.

The miracle was wrought by the gas mask containers slung over every elegantly clad shoulder.

It is impossible to explain how so common a little cardboard box produced so revolutionary an effect, how it had branded these men so that even the courteous station master, so miraculously able to open all the first class compartment doors and to pay particular attention to each first class passenger in so short a time, could not lift them from the status of the herd. The common little grey or buff cardboard boxes had stolen the scene and although, one knew, they imprisoned peculiarly hideous gas masks, they showed gaiety as they bobbed and swayed on these unaccustomed shoulders and were aware, I felt, of some triumph.

As I watched before hurrying to my third class carriage, my amusement was mingled with slight depression; there was something symbolic in the scene; and I felt that nothing, and no one, could ever be the same again in this our England.

## FRONT TO BACK

I might add here that with the passing of weeks and months this thought has been modified. It was not long before the elegant bores of the station had abandoned the nasty little cardboard boxes for something in the way of well-sewn leather, and to-day even the leather cases are seldom carried.

Although the third class carriages of this line are shabby, not very clean, and uncomfortable, I had never been aware of this in any particular way until that morning. My two friends, Paul and Noel, with whom I had made the hour's journey to London each summer morning for two years, were missing. They had evidently been called to their Territorial units; and from then on, I knew, I must face certain facts on the journey, and not only on train journeys: that in abandoning a life of movement and adventure for one of security, I must submit to the fact of middle-age, to the still more awful fact of middle-class and steady life lived with other steady middle-aged gents of the middle-class who travelled in third class compartments day after day, month after month, year after year until they exchange the gloomy shabbiness of the third class carriage for the gleaming back enamel and silver plating of the hearse.

Terribly depressing; yet while I enjoyed a certain emotional kick, I decided that I would most certainly abandon the farm-house for that summer and immediately open the London bed-sitting-room.

The absence of Noel and Paul was, for me, the first unpleasant fact of the war; and so gloomy were my thoughts as the journey progressed, and more and more middle-aged gents joined the train, that I saw both lying dead on the battle-field some minutes before we reached Euston Square.

And yet Noel and Paul are ordinary enough men of

twenty-four and twenty-five, both with red hair, both rather wide young men of sturdy build whose love for the country-side is more intense because life has forced them both to earn their living totting up figures as Accountants. On our train journeys — we met but seldom at other times — we were a close society, quickly responsive to all impressions made by our fellow-travellers, cruelly critical, if not malicious, yet finding great fun in very simple things. Noel (the elder) and I always assumed that Paul, who is handsome, was dreadfully susceptible to feminine charm. If the unhappy Paul led us by chance into a carriage already occupied by a young woman, we invariably reduced him to blushing embarrassment before the journey ended by eloquent glances at each other (instantly noted by Paul) and by occasional pointed whispers. Sometimes, Paul and I joined forces and attacked Noel who was supposed to be deeply in love with the daughter of an Irish peer. And so the journeys passed quickly; and if our conversation was innocent of wit and quite silly at times, we were happy together: and I loved both of them.

I went to their house for tea last Christmas Day. There was a brother-in-law in the smart light blue of the Air Force; Noel, who had been ill, was in mufti; but Paul appeared looking like an immense brown bear in the modern battle dress of a private soldier. I had not seen him in uniform before, and the sight depressed me as he crossed the room to sit near my chair on a sofa abandoned by Paul's young nephew's governess who had been knitting socks with steel needles and had dangerously left her work on the sofa.

As Paul approached in his rather scruffy battle dress, I thought of the Harris tweeds he usually wore with effect; and I began wondering when next I would see him in them. Years might pass. Possibly I would never see him again in

## FRONT TO BACK

civilian kit. I felt very depressed, but prepared to meet him cheerfully.

Paul has always had a habit of addressing anyone he has not seen for some time in rather conventional tones. His father was our rector; and I think he has inherited that genial tone of voice whose well-meant warmth tends to freeze some souls.

Most victims will recognize this instantly, those pleasant head tones, 'Well, and how have you been keeping — well, I hope?'

As Paul reached me, he said precisely that in precisely that way; but before I could rekindle his friendship — an easy task — he had sat down heavily on the steel knitting needles left on the sofa by his young nephew's governess.

There were no head tones nor geniality in his mighty yell as he leapt from the room with at least one knitting needle an inch or two in his flesh.

After a suitable interval, during which he was expertly bandaged and the considerable flow of blood staunched, Paul returned to the living-room in his old Harris tweeds. A steel knitting needle had achieved without effort what the whole world would like to see done for all young men. Perhaps, I thought, there will be peace, soon; and we shall wonder why we permitted the Nazis to disturb us so much.

Evidently, it seemed that first Monday morning of war, the Nazis were in no hurry to disturb London. It had always seemed to me inevitable that Hitler would let London have all he could offer in the way of bombs from the word Go!

This seemed an obvious proceeding to our leaders, and they had prepared as far as possible; believing that only a four or five inch roof of steel spread over the great city could save it from complete disorganization if the Nazi air force attacked with all their strength.

The whole subject is a complex one, and much has been

said and written about it; but given the Nazi moral code, it still seems to me that they missed their best opportunity. They should have made every effort to blow London to smithereens before the first week of war had passed.

Like Mr. Churchill, I instantly discounted any feelings of false delicacy in the Nazi breasts. Perhaps the demand to maintain a mighty reserve of petrol proved too great; it was rumoured that the German people could not 'take' counter-measures, that reprisals would destroy their morale; and there were some who believed that the Nazi air force was not strong enough to risk an attack on London great enough to be worth while.

Perhaps they decided to bore us into submission; this might be a good plan if it were not for the danger of our becoming bored with being bored, and doing something about it. It will be nice to know the reasons for London's escape during these first months when the war is over. None of us seem able to fathom them now.

We had endured a poor sort of English summer; but almost with the declaration of war had come a change, and the first days of September were very lovely indeed. I think we might have been too anxious and disturbed to appreciate them if the balloon barrage had not forced us to look up often and thus to see how very clear and blue the sky remained.

In the show windows of the small nondescript stores in South Sea Island seaports there can often be seen large mother-of-pearl shells acting as trays for assortments of pearls, of little value because their shape tends to be irregular and often oval, but as lustrous and beautiful as any pearl of price. London's sky that lovely Monday morning might have been an immense mother-of-pearl shell. The effect was altogether charming.

But if it were true that the Nazis had indirectly encrusted our London sky with gleaming pearls, it was hard, at first,

## FRONT TO BACK

to forgive them the destruction they had wrought in our London policemen. Many of us will always associate the outbreak of war with what seemed the breaking of a tradition, the tradition that our policemen are not as other men.

We Londoners have a warm affection for our police, and we are delighted when Americans and foreigners share our appreciation. We had always felt that their courtesy, helpfulness, and manly good looks had earned them this regard. No one had ever suggested that much of their virtue and attraction were packed in their not particularly attractive helmets. The suggestion is not made now; all I can say is that something intangibly important, and attractive, had been exchanged for a tin hat.

Admittedly, a tin hat gives a dashing, martial effect to a commonplace as to a handsome face; I can still recall the magnificent effect they created on the heads of the American detachment which led the victory march through London after the last war, and I think it is true to say that all the soldiers in tin hats of all the belligerents who adorn the illustrated papers to-day seem to have magnificent profiles and to be of a fine, clean, manly character.

On the heads of our police, the tin hats failed. They revealed as fact what we know to be untrue, that our policemen are ordinary enough Englishmen, some good-looking, some homely and some even plain; that a few have ears sticking out too far and that some are not careful in their choice of hairdressers. But this was not enough; and I finally found a much more simple explanation which admittedly sounds weak. The tin hat has an atmosphere of abruptness, in harmony with first rate drill — springing to attention smartly, saluting with a spring-like rapidity, 'Yes, Sir! No, Sir!' marching in perfect step, even goose-stepping (why do they, incidentally?) and, generally, everything sharply defined and a little cruel.

All very well for a soldier, but devastating to our London policemen.

We had become more or less used to a London littered about with sandbags; what seemed most startling that Monday morning as I walked to the office was the air of readiness and alertness shown by the large numbers of A.R.P. wardens, fire-fighters and auxiliary police now in charge of the streets.

Of these we naturally approved; their job would be far from pleasant if anything happened; but even on that Monday, many quiet citizens were conscious of irritation when they saw so many private cars labelled with urgent looking notices. 'Food Priority', an inexplicable kind of notice appeared on many windscreens of many unsuitable motors; 'Ambulance' occasionally adorned a small car whose capacity was distinctly limited; 'A.R.P.' could be accepted; 'Fire' might be understood; 'Doctor' offered a sympathetic touch; but all of them were vaguely annoying.

It was reported in the newspapers that a young woman went about London in a shabby Baby Austin with 'Just Me!' writ large across her windscreen. She, I decided, was trying to defeat the impression which many of us shared during those first days, that to drive about London unlabelled was to be unobtrusively driving the hearse to one's own cremation.

There was much which was entertaining and exciting.

Outside an important London railway terminus, they had erected an immense canvas water container whose beautifully fresh water reflected the pearl-encrusted sky. Its use was obvious enough; but in passing it occurred to me, probably because of the decorative effect of the barrage balloons, that a few goldfish would improve the effect. This thought must have occurred to others; during the blackout a night or two later goldfish were duly supplied, but by then the water

## FRONT TO BACK

had lost its pellucidness and its surface carried enough cigarette ends and other rubbish to poison the most hardy goldfish.

I found the staff at the office quite unable to concentrate on routine work, and so we abandoned the attempt, listening to all radio broadcasts and buying newspapers from every man who went bellowing along our street.

Our packers were in happier case. Commanded by Jones, the foreman packer, they were completing the job of transferring our back garden into sandbags designed to protect the roof of the office dugout. Jones, a wiry man in his early forties and a veteran of the last war, was stripped to the waist and working magnificently, much to the joy of various maids who enjoyed a grandstand view of him from the kitchen windows of houses along the row. In my presence his behaviour was decorous; but there was evidence in his audience that he had been putting up a good show.

The destruction of the back garden marked the end of a determined crusade to produce beauty in a closely confined space of not more than twelve square yards. By constant spraying, I had reached at least a deadlock with green, black and red fly so that odd blossoms broke through deformed and half-eaten leaves and at last I had been given an excellent tip which forced the London cats to leap from the garden with speed and agility instead of pausing to do all the dreadful things cats can do in a small cultivated plot when the sun has set. This consisted of planting small jars of common cleansing ammonia at odd intervals amongst the plants.

I had learnt much about London back-yard gardening; and as the autumn approached, I felt that our spring and summer failures would be forgotten in the September glory of our big variety of Michaelmas daisies.

Our office dugout is a neat commodious affair. A back room in the basement of an Adams Bloomsbury house, it

probably began existence as a small servants' hall in the days when well-to-do city merchants lived in Bloomsbury.

We had taken over the house from a Scotswoman who had run it as a small flat building; and our dugout had then been a flatlet whose tenant had the use of the adjoining bathroom and a nearby kitchenette. The last tenant had been Mr. Brown; and because we had inherited the Scotswoman's housekeeper who continued to refer to the room as Mr. Brown's room, it was still so-called until the war turned it into the dugout.

Mr. Brown must have been a hardy individual to survive in that room. Until we had hot pipes carried to it and a radiator fixed, it was useless as a stockroom for books which had immediately become damp.

With the bathroom and kitchenette handy, and now heavily fortified with sandbags, blast-screens and mighty timbers, Mr. Brown's room could stand a siege without difficulty and could only be destroyed by a direct hit, an eventuality which could hardly matter since its occupants would not be aware of any untoward happening. The dugout is, of course, kept provisioned with chocolate, sugar, water and matches; and any occupants who may find themselves buried by the collapse of the old building above them, may amuse themselves by digging themselves out with a useful crow-bar, a stout shovel and a spade; all of which remain handy.

Since for most of the winter I have been the sole occupant of the old house at night time, I have urged the staff not to forget me if they arrive one morning to find the place bombed. They must mention me and my probable predicament in Mr. Brown's room to any A.R.P. workers who may be about.

Lately, some of the other flat tenants have returned to our building. These are highly respectable spinsters whom I

## FRONT TO BACK

treat with the most uncompromising civility; but I imagine we would all become quite familiar and chatty if we were imprisoned in Mr. Brown's room for a day or two.

I had had to watch the strengthening of this dugout very carefully. The workmen we had employed refused to believe there would be a war and regarded their work in Mr. Brown's room as a waste of time and good timber. I was forced more than once to rebut the foreman's contemptuous remark, 'Itler's bluffin''. I urged him to realize that we were strengthening Mr. Brown's room on the assumption that Hitler was not bluffing; and I begged him to accept this assumption, assuring him that our last thoughts of him (the foreman) would not be flattering if the framework of timber he was then erecting proved a peril in itself.

Apparently I had impressed one of the workmen who remarked: 'Well, sir, there's got to be war occasionally; there's too many people in the world. If we don't have a war, we'll 'ave a pestilence.'

I refused to accept this, to follow the thought to its logical conclusion, which would have forced us instantly to abandon work on Mr. Brown's room. If all found shelter from what an enemy could do in a war, a war could not cancel out a pestilence; and we should have both!

The day passed without incident, a curious day in a usually busy London office where the telephone is seldom idle. During that day, not one call reached my desk, nor did I find any need to telephone.

## CHAPTER IV

'WHAT will America do? Will she come in?'

The question was often asked in Britain during the first exciting days of this war, and almost invariably answered — 'No, she won't come in — not this time!'

No reasons were sought; the factor of American neutrality was accepted as constant, and left at that.

With perhaps a little more knowledge of the United States than many British people, knowledge gained during the last war and since, I could agree with this instinctive feeling.

After 1918, and prevailing until now, disillusionment in regard to European struggles is clear in what can be sensed of American consciousness; and this disillusionment has been closely associated with what is called British propaganda. We British, the not altogether revolting villains in the piece, had dragged the United States into the last war by the scruff of the neck.

So very simple an explanation of the foreign policy of a great nation is obviously inadequate; I expect it will be admitted, however, that there is something in the suggestion.

Perhaps a better explanation is the natural detestation of war felt by the American people, inspiring a firm determination not to mistake blandishments for good reasons, and to keep out at all costs. We do not blame them over here.

However, while we can agree with the Americans in detesting warfare, we are bound to admit that it calls forth superb qualities; that while it may destroy human bodies, it may be less destructive than a barricaded peace capable of undermining the spirit of a nation and sapping its moral

## FRONT TO BACK

courage. It is a bad thing to kill men; but it may be worse not to accept slaughter on behalf of simple duty.

And so the American people remain, and most probably will remain, a deeply interested audience watching the people of Europe play out their latest drama. I expect they are willing to accept the inevitability of some confusion when heroes and villains declaim almost precisely the same noble lines; but they can hardly be blamed if they suggest that the entertainment value of a production so lavishly produced would be greatly enhanced if the actors kept strictly behind the footlights and abandoned the side-shows they occasionally offer in cheaper parts of the house. They must find great difficulty in admitting as good the reasons offered by some of the performers for the neat and expert annihilation of small, insignificant chunks of the audience nearer the stage; and they can hardly be blamed if they develop a feeling of redundancy: that, in a word (and to abandon an image) they suspect there may shortly be no neutrals south of the more frigid areas of the Arctic Circle when the (or a) National Anthem is played as a finale.

Some people think this may be *Deutschland über Alles*; others hope for a combination of *God Save the King* and the *Marseillaise*; some think of learning *The Red Flag* as a precautionary measure in order to join in; and there are even some who anticipate tom-toms as a logical finale — shocking pessimists, these, who cling to the absurd notion that this lovely world may be enjoyed by all men, that Paradise is with us if we would but accept the divine command as a command, and not an ecclesiastical request, to love our neighbours as ourselves; and lose all Fear.

During these first weeks of the war, I often recalled that as a young soldier in the Great War, I felt some contempt, or pity, for older people and civilians who seemed to exhaust themselves so unnecessarily in detesting the Germans, telling

each other what seemed wildly exaggerated stories of atrocities and becoming quite hot under the collar when the Kaiser's name was mentioned.

I realize now that my sympathy, if unnoticed, was not unjustified. I can now, happily, feel sorry for myself when I find myself extremely annoyed with Hitler and his followers; an attitude of mind which, as a young soldier, I would have thought stuffy. Often, lately, I have decided that if the earth's crust were to open and engulf the entire German nation, this world might have more chance of peace; but I am still young enough to realize that so miraculous a movement could only be achieved by divine decree, that a wise Providence might not be bound by international frontiers.

As the war progresses, the more articulate elements in the United States are bound to be on guard against British propaganda. It will give them something to write about and more to talk about; but is otherwise a waste of time. A good cause requires no designed propaganda, nor can it be basicly hurt by stupid attempts to advertise its virtues. Truth is without glitter, but as it inevitably floats to the surface of the most unruly and confused sea, its message is apparent to all men of good intent and may be ignored at their peril. Others, jackals in at the kill, do not matter.

Of course, during the last war, there may have been hidden in Whitehall somewhere a clever nucleus of brainy persons working out schemes to seduce the United States into joining our side; but there has always seemed a perfectly simple reason for the entry of that country into the struggle.

Germany's war technique had naturally shocked the American people; but strong disapproval was not enough to swing a great and unwieldy nation to the point of risking the lives of its young men in a purely European struggle and thus to fly in the face of a powerful tradition.

## FRONT TO BACK

The British have God; the Americans have Washington also, and they never forget the latter's advice to avoid European entanglements at all costs. Those of us who have travelled widely in the United States and have had the joy of really knowing and loving the ordinary small men and women in that country are amazed to discover how very conservative they are.

It was Fear which allowed President Wilson to declare war on behalf of a largely united nation — the discovery of the futile Mexican-Japanese-German plot. It was at once feared that the people of the United States could not hope to avoid the attention of a victorious Germany. The most brilliantly conceived propaganda cannot compete in driving force with Fear, possibly the most important factor in human relations. I do not, of course, mean cowardly fear which is something vastly different and utterly destructive to its victims.

I was in Philadelphia the evening the newspapers exposed the German intrigue. Nothing, I then knew, could save Germany from her own foolishness.

It will be interesting to see, dear Brutus, if Germany, with another shepherd, will follow the crook across similarly dangerous swamps. There is evidence that she will; although she may be expected to avoid some quagmires before she is finally engulfed. She is bound to her idols.

No good purpose can be served by British attempts to influence American opinion, and attempts are not being made. Perhaps it is realized that our traditional habit of understatement and dislike of exaggeration — our rudimentary sense of timing and poor sense of dramatic news, the British shopkeeper, in a word — make anything we may offer a weak piping on a tin whistle, easily drowned by the sonorous roll of the German Wurlitzer shaking the American people into war-dance postures with its repertoire of one

tune which inexplicably comes out as Rule Britannia.

Why do they do it? Has not someone told them not to? If Germany finds herself at a hopeless disadvantage with an enemy commanding the sea — an enemy she should never make; if she sees the morale of her fine soldiers slowly decaying in the rot induced by the blockade, forcing her to make the worst of a bad job by unethical conduct; she should be defiant about it, and offer no excuse. Lying merely advances the end.

The war had hardly begun before the unhappy *Athenia* was reported to be sinking two hundred miles off the coast of Ireland on her way to America with, it was presumed, a large number of Americans on board. The news shocked, but did not surprise, the world. 'The Germans are at their old tricks again; they cannot behave like sailors of the sea!'

I believe the news shocked the Nazi leaders, eager to avoid the more glaring stupidities of their 1914 predecessors, but instead of an honest admission of a mistake, they spread abroad a cock-and-bull story that we had sunk the liner in order to drag America into the war. They seemed to be naively unaware that even if the guilty submarine had been plastered with Union Jacks with Jack Tars dancing horn-pipes on her decks while the commander with an Oxford accent ordered the torpedo to be fired, none but fools in the neutral world would accept this as evidence of British guilt, or lunacy. The general effect was simply to emphasize the essential decency and humanity of British seamen.

The Nazis had no chance of success. Poison to be effective must be offered secretly in small doses, not flung about like pies in an early motion picture. The foul crime was emphasized, even making some people suspect that not only its commission but also its stupid explanation had been designed in Germany at the same moment.

## FRONT TO BACK

The tragedy and its implications should have warned the Nazis. Perhaps they still think that if you are going to tell a lie you might as well tell a whopper, and stick to it — an idea long out-moded in a modern, sophisticated world forced to be tolerant of naked truth, but free to be bored to the teeth with righteously clothed lies.

Soon we were treated to the *Ark Royal* incident which, with the passing of time, has become the world's best joke. Nevertheless, the incident was of supreme importance to all students of modern naval tactics.

A British submarine had escaped the deadly attention of many German depth charges, and the fleet escorting her back to her base was strongly attacked by German aircraft. Much depended upon the success or failure of this attack, the first of its kind. Had it succeeded, British command of the sea might have been seriously affected; it could, conceivably, have been lost. Fortunately, the attack was repulsed without serious difficulty and to us land-lubbers it seemed that the navy's most difficult hurdle had been taken successfully.

The Luftwaffe has had a magnificent Press, and although some of us have regarded with amusement its carbide-like effect on the watery blood of our own more intelligent poltroons, few of us dared to regard its first impact with our hitherto invincible navy without anxious interest. But apparently the admiral commanding the fleet escorting the crippled submarine was unaware of any crisis when he repelled the attack; a 'mere episode' he called it; and we might have remained in ignorance of the engagement if the German radio had not blared forth to the world that they had not only sunk our pet aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, but had also seriously crippled one of our capital ships.

Many of us were inclined to believe the Nazi radio; warfare for us is invariably a series of disasters; and we were prepared for gloomy news.

Happily, the Lord had delivered the Germans into the hands of Mr. Churchill, well equipped to meet them on their own ground and now with his delicious sense of humour invincibly armed with truth. Asked a question in the Commons regarding the German announcement, he was able to tell the story of the 'mere episode' with the lightest of touches, as if he were describing the adventures of a provincial lady annoyed by wasps at tea in her country garden — a slight incident, given good entertainment value by brilliantly controlled treatment. Some wasps had been destroyed; it was true the lady's tea had been interrupted for a few seconds but if the subject of wasps had not been raised, she would not have mentioned her adventures with them.

It is possible that the Nazi airmen had been mistaken, giving a false report based on the effect of a near miss when the *Ark Royal* is said to have given an alarming heave; but the German authorities should have been aware that a British minister commits political suicide, apart from endangering his party, if he lies in replying to a question put by the Opposition. They should have abandoned the *Ark Royal* as dangerous propaganda and clung to the *Courageous* whose sinking we reported to them. But they stuck to their story and continued to shout ad nauseam, 'Ask your Admiralty where the *Ark Royal* is?'

Our pet aircraft carrier was a veritable godsend to Lord Haw-Haw.

Quite by chance, of course, Mr. Churchill invited the American naval attaché to visit the fleet at this time; and doubtless because the British sailors sing with effect in the great main hangar of *Ark Royal*, the American officer went to Morning Prayer on board that vessel. He reported accordingly.

Even this was not enough. 'Ask your Admiralty,' the Nazi went on shouting, — 'where is the *Ark Royal*?' thus

## FRONT TO BACK

inviting the American naval attaché to regard himself as a fish, or a liar.

Finally, they admitted that perhaps the British had painted the name *Ark Royal* on another ship to deceive the American naval officer; thus calling the unfortunate gentleman a fool.

The incident reached a pleasant climax in Germany when the pilot who had not sunk the *Ark Royal* was decorated with the Iron Cross of both the first and second classes, while the crew were given iron crosses of the second class only.

One tries to untangle this curious incident; it is oversimplification to call the Nazis concerned a collection of first class liars; if, on the other hand, they could see themselves as first, second and third class idiots; there might be some hope for them.

I have written of the above stale news because I want to show, or emphasize, how absolutely redundant the most brilliant British propaganda must be when we are fighting the Germans.

They have no luck. When their beautiful liner *Bremen* was approaching the end of her journey home to Germany, she was seen, within torpedo range, by our submarine *Salmon*. Under no circumstances could a passenger ship be sunk without warning by a British warship.

When the *Salmon*'s commander reported the incident, there was at once a flood of Nazi propaganda which apparently had some effect in America where the war was again called 'cock-eyed', and there seemed some suggestion that we were indeed decadent.

'The British have calmly allowed a potential enemy to escape,' it was said; 'the *Bremen* will shortly go commerce-raiding and will sink dozens of British ships.'

While most of us knew that as a commerce-raider the

*Bremen* was much too large, contenting ourselves with the thought that she would come in handy after the war, we were not happy about her escape. The Germans had scored a hit, we feared.

But the next day, *Salmon* torpedoed a large German submarine and two cruisers, winning a magnificent Press, literally built up on foundations laid by the Nazis.

People are always complaining in this country about our poor attempts at publicizing our cause. The B.B.C. comes in for a big share of abuse with, I think, some quaint results. A note of contemptuous annoyance with the Germans and a rather alarming attempt at sarcasm has been lately creeping into the pleasant accents of our announcers. I am all for these announcers whose voices I regard with fraternal interest; but I think they make a mistake in showing the Nazis anything but pleasant manners. While our cause remains good, while the object of our journey, no matter how hard and terrible the way towards its end may be, is simple duty, we cannot afford to be anything but perfectly polite, and devastating. Our object is to kill the Germans; to insult them is to pay them a compliment. In any case, is it worth while?

Lord Haw-Haw has enjoyed great success in Britain. One newspaper the other day noted a touch of adenoids in his voice; but I think we are all bound to admit that his lazy slightly nasal cadence and perpetual sneer are wholly effective for his purposes. What he says, or much of it, may still be heard in the third class compartments of suburban trains rushing into London every morning and cannot, therefore, do very much harm. The authorities have wisely decided to ignore him. Many people listen in to what he has to say and are either amused or very indignant. There have been alarming rumours of irate farmers in my district taking an axe to perfectly good radio sets; but I think these may be

## FRONT TO BACK

discounted. He interested me at first because it was an unusual experience actually to hear the voice of a traitor. When the war is over, I should imagine his position might be extremely difficult if he fails to make a quick get-away. It is to be feared that he may die, suddenly.

## CHAPTER V

DURING these early days of the war, I met a number of senior Canadian officers, all veterans of the last war, who were stationed in London. They had apparently arrived in a glow of patriotic confidence, which delighted us in London; but it was not long before one or two of them developed rather low spirits. I blamed the foul winter we were enduring; but they said they had anticipated something of the kind and were not dismayed. One of them remarked rather sombrely one evening that he sincerely hoped those in supreme authority in the allied councils had some kind of picture before them. If they had, he seemed to think, the picture was rather blurred.

I invariably maintained a completely optimistic view, often assuring my Canadian friends that we would — yes, muddle through after we had survived a number of inevitable disasters. This apparently inspired one of them to relate an experience he had had during the last war.

It seems that he had been in charge of a London district during an air raid. A bomb had pierced a main road in the Smithfield neighbourhood, demolishing a great water main and consequently producing a fountain which promptly flooded the road.

A number of those beautiful, heavy draught horses which still adorn London roads even in this motor age had been tethered to their wagons beside the kerb, and the Canadian officer, then a young subaltern, who had expected to witness a devastating stampede, was amazed to see each horse, after a comic kind of shudder which rattled his harness, bend down his head to enjoy a thoroughly good drink.

'That incident is,' concluded the Canadian officer,

## FRONT TO BACK

'thoroughly typical of our British attitude. We will never fail to find at least one comfortable implication in any menacing threat — and ignore the rest.'

I gained the impression that he feared we might be caught out one of these days.

The soul-shattering crash of a bomb, even of the 1916 vintage, should be enough to make any horse bolt with consequent disaster to himself and probably to others, human and equine, on a crowded road; but apart from the fact that London horses are accustomed to all kinds of startling noises, these horses had been bred and broken in by British men and women. They were daily driven by excellent, if thoroughly sentimental, London drivers; and no animal is more quickly sensitive to the character of his master than a horse.

Thus it was that the calm, and wise, behaviour of the Smithfield horses reflected the spirit of their British friends and masters. Even if all seemed to be wrecked, nothing could be gained by panic. Standing fast and accepting with pleasure the best in a bad situation was the only wise thing to do.

Possibly our own history has taught us that many surprising results may be enjoyed by refusing to accept, without trial, the implications hidden by apparent facts.

Commodore Harwood had one undoubted fact thrust under his bows when his squadron made contact with *Graf Spee* off Monte Video, that he was out-gunned by an enemy who could pick off his ships one by one. He thought it impossible, however, to accept this fact without trial, and he tried. In any case, the contretemps seems to have been of his own arranging.

It is not my purpose to write about the River Plate action as if I knew anything about it; but lay impressions in Britain at the time may be of interest.

The village inn, always fair and often realistic, with odd eruptions of monstrous optimism, said in effect, 'Well, after all, it was three to one, wasn't it?'

I could point out, and be convincing for the moment, that numbers could confuse, but should not have decisively affected, the great advantage in range enjoyed by the *Graf Spee*. I said, automatically, because it was often said by so many, that she should have been able to pick off the British cruisers one by one.

Of course we heard all kinds of stories from those who knew people who knew; but one naval officer friend, after assuring me that he thought the British forces held the advantage in the engagement, went on to explain that by steaming to within penetrating range of *Exeter*'s guns, *Graf Spee* made a fatal error. Apparently, she need not have done so. This naval officer thought the German gunnery highly efficient until their control tower was put out of action.

Another friend, who knew someone with a naval officer friend who had attended a lecture on the battle by one of the officers from one of the cruisers, assured me that *Exeter* fought the battle without any hope whatever. 'Well,' they thought on board, 'here we are; we're up against a pocket battleship who is certain to sink us; there is nothing to do but to fight until we *do* sink.'

Apparently, judging from what this friend told me, similar forebodings were endured on at least one of the smaller cruisers; who also saw that there was no alternative but to fight.

I also gathered that as the cruisers lurked outside Monte Video waiting for *Graf Spee* to emerge, the people on board were by no means certain of the result of the expected battle. Another cruiser had replaced *Exeter* who, it is alleged, still remained in the extreme offing; but otherwise they had not been reinforced.

## FRONT TO BACK

It seems difficult to believe, but I have been told that the first news of *Graf Spee*'s end reached one cruiser through a bland B.B.C. announcement. This can be explained by the fact that the information was signalled to the cruiser through the proper channels in cipher, that while the signal was being deciphered, the B.B.C. announcement was made.

I heard an elderly naval officer of high rank discussing the River Plate action not long after the news reached us. He was immensely pleased and proud; but for a few moments he looked very stern, even cross, when he remarked, 'It was actually very foolhardy'.

While we in Britain appreciate good stories in our papers, I think it is true to say that when most of us discuss the war stories of any successes we may enjoy we almost invariably add, 'If you can believe what the papers say'.

Some of us, I think wrongly, regard all information, even that contained in official communiqués, with great reserve. My own impression is that our Government are well aware of the awful dangers lurking in any attempt to deceive the British people and that such attempts are not made.

We accepted with much reserve all the stories of the unsteadiness shown by *Graf Spee*'s crew during the action. There were British witnesses on board, but their view of the situation on board a large ship during an action through what amounted to a key-hole could hardly have been comprehensive. It must be extremely difficult for even free individuals on board a ship during an action to gain an impression which can be safely applied generally. However, it seems to have been accepted that the young German crew showed great distress when blood was shed, that the *Exeter*'s thrust into the bread-basket, the galley, of *Graf Spee* had a demoralizing effect; and that, generally, the German crew behaved in no way like British sailors under similar conditions. I incline to the safe view that the German sailors did not behave

like British sailors because they were not British sailors; and that there is every probability that until the lucky *Exeter* shot destroyed the main control tower, the German crew worked efficiently.

We land-lubbers in London thoroughly enjoyed the Battle of the River Plate, giving ourselves up for a space to exultation in a victory which seemed to show that what the newspapers and many others called (rather monotonously) 'the Nelson touch' still lived in our navy.

Incidentally, it has often occurred to me that if our navy decided to sail away from our shores, leaving us to our fate, we would more fully realize the magnificent work done by our sailors. A trifling victory by the army wins instant applause and setbacks are explained away with deep sympathy. Even military defeats are forgiven, many of us forgetting that these are not catastrophic because the navy stands invincible and silent in the background, making it possible to re-form, to start again, offering tenacity its chance.

I do not think it is British hypocrisy to say that *Graf Spee*'s end did not give us deep-seated satisfaction. We cannot willingly spare the life of a single sailor; but had she gone down in battle, inflicting wounds before her own death, the picture would have offered us a completeness which we associate with sea warfare.

We love ships, their beautiful form; and *Graf Spee* was a tall ship. The motion pictures of her last short journey aroused in many of us a deep sympathy, for her; not for her betrayers.

Stories had already reached us of Captain Langsdorf's essential decency; he had been courteous and considerate to our men; and there was something appreciative and pleasant in his reported remark about, 'those incredible cruisers'. When the news came of his suicide, many of us were conscious of distress. Across the air had come the atmosphere of a gentle-

## FRONT TO BACK

man; and it was impossible to imagine him in association with the fantastic Hitler.

The mixed joy and gloom in the victory, even if the gloom was largely superficial, was soon exchanged for a more hilarious mood when Lord Haw-Haw offered his comments.

Germany had tried to fit in a victory when information first reached Europe, but after the ship had been scuttled, this attitude was difficult to maintain.

Lord Haw-Haw spoke very eloquently indeed; and most convincingly, even when he pointed out that *Graf Spee*'s mission was to sink merchantmen, not to fight warships; and that therefore she had been treated very badly indeed. Which, of course, was true; lightly armed merchantmen treated her powerful guns with much more respect.

Some of us think the River Plate battle may prove in the end to be symptomatic of the Nazi war — an efficient fighting machine, great success where odds are unequal, a brave display and much talk, a battle, or threat of battle against equal strength, a defeat not unaffected by destruction of the main galley and food supply, a few suicides and a final scuttle. Altogether an unlovely picture!

When two of the cruisers returned to Britain, we in London were given some pageantry; and many of us enjoyed happy emotion particularly when the crew of *Exeter* marched through the streets of London to Guildhall for a civic luncheon. There were touching pictures of the King decorating heroes of the action, and pinning medals on the widows of fine men who had died. There was a particularly pleasant picture of the Queen hanging on to the hand of a perfectly detached small girl while she yarned with some of the women. The Queen seemed very much one of them; there was no awful atmosphere of royalty in the honest expression of sincerity in her nice face. It is something to have a good Scots woman to share the throne of Britain.

The news reels showed Mr. Churchill talking to one of the widows and turning away quickly to hide what looked remarkably like a sob as he lightly patted her back. I loved him for it.

But perhaps the most delightful picture showed a young sailor gazing at a flapper with undisguised horror and alarm as she tried to give him a bouquet, affording the older men in the ranks following great amusement. The flappers with the flowers were trying to emulate their French sisters under similar circumstances; but British sailors and nosegays do not harmonize *very* well.

I do not want to suggest that some of us in London were shocked at the amount of rather produced attention shown the cruiser men after the River Plate engagement; God knows we are deeply grateful to the men of *Exeter*, *Ajax* and *Achilles*; it is merely that it must be admitted that people remarked more than once, 'They're making the most of it, aren't they?'

I expect we all realize that the end is not yet as day by day, and night after night, seamen are out on the cruel North Sea during this cruel winter; and they also serve as they serve on small ships, at close grips with the sea, fighting daily, sometimes hourly, battles which demand more personal courage even than that shown on the cruisers; winning daily, sometimes hourly, battles which are not recorded.

When they lose; and death may be long in offering relief in freezing seas, there are no witnesses.

The end is not yet. Dare we rejoice when the to-morrows are unknown.

I think there had been spread about the thought that because the Germans give their people the ersatz wine of organized rejoicing, we should do the same. It had been suggested that the gloom of war-time London might be relieved by martial display. The notion may have been a

## FRONT TO BACK

good one; but my impression is that this Nazi war, with all its painful waiting, its boredom; if boredom may harmonize with what we know is happening on the seas around our island; is not like other wars. The British people, the ordinary British people, need nothing to keep their minds on, or off, the business in hand. To us, the whole thing is unsavoury and obnoxious; and while nothing can affect our determination to go on, many of us secretly resent any attempts to glorify that which stinks to high Heaven like the foul men who begat it.

Even while we watched the men of *Exeter* with a glow of affection and pride as they marched through London; there was no 'decadence' there; some of us thought of the broken body of the unhappy Langsdorf rotting in his Buenos Aires grave. His murderer, the incredible Hitler, is never far from our thoughts. Langsdorf, we think, was a good man; his master may not easily be labelled; but neither the former with that in him too weak to face up to life, nor the latter, whatever he is, is an opponent over whom a victory with a shred of glory may be won.

This war, I hold, is the business of the mass of our people of the British Empire. It is not a gentleman's war, and, very definitely, it is not a business man's war. My impression, without doubting the loyalty of our business men, is that some of them regard the war as an extremely annoying interruption to the delightful game of making money. The ordinary working people, in a way which never ceases to amaze me, have very definite ideas about the war. Twice now I have heard the threat uttered quite seriously by calm working people, 'There will be a revolution in England if they make peace with Hitler'.

How we enjoyed the *Altmark* incident; yes, and some of us were sentimental enough to believe that the triumph would have been greater had there been no loss of life; inevitable,

A U T U M N 1939

we are told. Some of the German sailors had behaved decently to our men.

I found myself reading, and re-reading, every paper I could find, browsing over every sentence in complete enjoyment. I thought the reprinted German accounts particularly delightful.

The incident was discussed quite frankly in London. Although we could agree that under the circumstances we had no choice but to violate Norwegian neutrality; the fact that neutrality had been violated was admitted, and regretted.

The papers assured us that the *Altmark* captain was a hide-bound Nazi, and a most unattractive individual with a goatee beard; but we could easily see that his job was peculiarly difficult. With nearly four hundred British sailors on board, many of them tough individuals with little thought for their personal safety, far out-numbering his crew; he dared take no chances. He knew they were quite capable of attempting to take the vessel and to sail her into a British port. And even had he wanted to, he could not have given comfortable quarters to so many.

His oration to his prisoners seemed not unkindly when he explained that he had plenty of food but that, owing to a defective condenser, water was scarce. He added that sick prisoners would be treated like his own crew.

When pictures of the *Altmark* captain appeared in our papers, we looked in vain for a stern-looking Nazi commander. We saw merely an elderly sea captain standing near the graves of his dead seamen, not at all forbidding; nor did his goatee beard appear to be very well drilled.

I feel it is so important to stress the undoubted fact that while there may be many of us busy fire-eating, and damning the Germans to Hell, the great majority of us try to retain our sense of values. We have one object, victory;

## FRONT TO BACK

possibly this may be gained more quickly under the impulsion of hate; but would not the object of our hard journey be missed if in gaining victory over the Nazis we defeated that left in us which can make for a sane and wholesome world?

P A R T   T W O

W I N T E R   1 9 3 9 - 1 9 4 0



## CHAPTER I

Six months have passed; and life in London remains secure and dull. Except when slung over the shoulders of the very aged or partially disabled, gas masks seldom appear. The young and beautiful, the healthy and strong with, apparently, much to live for, have evidently decided to risk asphyxiation if they now ever give gas bombs more than a passing thought.

Now that many walls of sandbags have been neatly enclosed with timber or lightly concreted to blend with the buildings they protect, there would be little to remind Londoners of the war if it were not for the large numbers of soldiers, many from Canada, who stroll peaceably about the streets in their far from martial battle dress, giving an atmosphere of ingenuous youth rather than anything bloodthirsty or particularly serious. They never tramp, tramp, tramp! nor goose-step; nor do they ever entertain us with military parades which might inspire us into a really *Grossbritannien über alles* condition.

Some people think this a pity. Perhaps it is; most certainly it would be a great strain on our sense of humour.

At night time in the West End when the theatres have closed, except on moonlight nights when London becomes a lovely dream city, the atmosphere seems spiritually cloudy and most unpleasant. One feels that the comparative stillness of the blackout has allowed all that is sinister and indecent to seep to the surface of the town. The impression, hard to define, may be caused by the very simple fact that others are swiftly and cunningly dodging you, as you are dodging them, to avoid collision. It is surprising with what force a walking pace will allow a body to crash into another.

## FRONT TO BACK

One evening I walked in the West End after leaving a large and gay reception at the Café Royal where, it seemed, all the great names in literature and art had met to peck at odd bits of decorative food set out on long tables in a blaze of glowing light.

The contrast in the dark, crowded streets was startling and depressing: and it seemed to me that all the knaves from Hell had invaded West London. In the occasional glow of hand torches, evil, hungry eyes shone; there were slinking men and large numbers of street-walking women forced through the darkness to be more intimate and bold in their approach. London that night, at that time, about 11.30, seemed singularly unfitted to be the heart of a mighty empire proclaiming a righteous crusade.

What right had we, I wondered, to assume the cloak of virtue and cleanliness when our mantle harmonized so well with night? Might not a good bombing be cleansing in effect? What claim to mercy had this great city of darkness?

I then noticed that the London buses, moving with surprising speed through the darkness, had lost their respectable and kindly character, going their mysterious and dim lit ways as if taking sad passengers to Charon at the Styx Landing. Taxis, nipping about in the traffic with only slightly reduced speed, proclaimed with an occasional hoarse blare their desire to carry men and women all the way to the devil at the rate of ninepence for the first mile.

'You,' I told myself, 'are becoming morbid, like Malvolio . . .' and walked home to bed in time to hear the midnight news.

When this war is over, I shall never listen to radio news; while the war is raging I know that I shall continue to sprint about the streets if there is any chance of missing a news bulletin by merely walking. I shall continue to plunge my key rapidly into the front door lock, and to leap up the three

flights of stairs to my sitting room and — just in time — 'This is the B.B.C. Home Service. Here is the news....'

Before daylight saving time lifted us from the slough of blackout despair, many citizens had been in peril in the courts through blackout offences. Those who came humbly, showing Godly repentance, were treated lightly; but others who had behaved pertly to the police were forced to pay heavy fines. There were alarming reports of particularly tactless, or unmannerly, offenders being fined as much as fifty pounds.

Well aware that popularity with our New South Wales employers would be seriously modified if we forced them to meet heavy fines through blackout offences, I tried to make the business as foolproof as possible by having all the office windows effectively draped with heavy black curtains running on brass curtain railways.

The expense in blacking out the rooms was considerable. I was therefore grateful to Mrs. Buttling when she agreed to supply heavy old velvet curtains for the big windows on the landings if we would meet the cost of their fitting with the railways. Professor and Mrs. Buttling occupy the big flat on the third floor. They are our star tenants.

Until the man came to do this particular work, we had been unaware of the offence which might lurk undetected in the bathroom and lavatory windows at the back of a house.

A man of experience and some delicacy, possibly because his work gives him the entrée to even the more intimate chambers in many houses, this curtain hanger warned me courteously without even mentioning the word lavatory that a person entering one of our bathrooms in a foggy moment during the afternoon would switch on the light and might forget to switch it off if he left during a bright interval. If unvisited for the rest of that day, that window would shine into the night, glowing like a naughty deed in a long virtuous

## FRONT TO BACK

row of carefully masked windows; and flood-lighting the vast mass of yellow brick which forms a side of the British Museum, one of the more distinctive buildings in London which the authorities prefer not to be marked during darkness. Being at the back, the offending light would only be detected by the Museum guards.

With the exception of Professor and Mrs. Buttling, our tenants are all quiet genteel women, most unlikely to be careless; while both the professor and his wife are one in loathing petty authority so intensely that they will take any pains to avoid suffering its infliction.

The war has annoyed the professor and his wife intensely; and they seem in no way prepared to welcome a bombardment in our neighbourhood. Filled with forebodings, they blackout their windows at the correct time; and withdraw from the outer world for the night.

Unhappily for them, the only door bell on our front door rings in their flat.

Now it happened that upon one very dull afternoon early in January, I left the office shortly before the official blackout time. My appointment was in the City at five o'clock; and since the business would take some time, I decided to go on to dinner, and not to return to business that night. I would, of course, return later to the old Bloomsbury house where I have a flat on the floor above the Buttlings.

I can recall before leaving for my appointment rushing speedily to the bathroom on the first floor and dashing from it with equal speed; but I cannot honestly accuse myself of switching on the light in that bathroom.

Someone switched it on, however; and after darkness fell, one of the auxiliary police guarding the British Museum saw it, and instantly decided to have it put out. If he had had a machine gun handy, doubtless a volley would have burst the bulb and solved the awful problem which soon con-

fronted that auxiliary policeman who, a barrister in civil life, regarded law as of supreme importance. I do not know what gifts his fairy godmother gave him at his birth; it is certain that a sense of humour was not one.

Safely blacked out, sitting before a sea-coal fire, the Buttlings were enjoying a little peace; quite unaware that a furious auxiliary policeman was charging about the smut-encrusted walls at the back of our long row of precisely alike Georgian houses, trying to find out the number of the house (ours) with the offending light so that he might enter from the street.

The unhappy man's problem will be understood when it is explained that there are about thirty houses in our block, all tightly joined together; that the night was pitch dark, thus making an efficient count from either end of the row out of the question, and that in most cases all the lower floors are offices which are abandoned after business hours. The walls separating the dozens of little back yards are quite high, and some of the little back yards have rockeries, quite entertaining in daylight, but dangerous in darkness.

A rocket with line to fire over the row of houses was indicated but the auxiliary policeman having nothing of the kind by him decided, after a long time spent negotiating the brick walls, to make a forcible entry through our office which occupies the basement and ground floors. Happily, at that moment, the old lady who lives in the basement in the house next to us, decided to put out her cat. Because she was effectively blacked-out, the policeman had been unaware of her. She, on the other hand, had listened in great trepidation to his mountaineering noises.

When, however, she realized he was an officer of the law, she allowed him to pass through her flat to the street; and simple arithmetic giving him our number, he was soon furiously pressing the Buttling's bell, not with gentle little

## FRONT TO BACK

polite presses, but with long drawn out, persistent stabbings.

The position of that policeman was extremely weak had he but known it. He had tried to count the floors from the back where the basement is almost level with the surface of our back yard; and this threw him out because our ground floor at the front is level with the street. He was confused, anyway; while he rang he believed the offending light was on the ground floor. Perhaps precision was impossible in that inky darkness.

I always contemplate the picture with pain when I see the seriously disturbed and very frightened Buttlings coming down the darkened staircase to the ground floor to open to that furious and peremptory ringing.

I do not think the policeman offered any courteous greeting; no attempt was made by him to quieten the shaken nerves of the professor and his wife; he merely said grimly, 'One of your lights is blazing from a back window!

'I am a police officer,' he added; and marched into the passage.

He then ordered them instantly to open our main office door; and they obeyed him, with Mrs. Buttling's master key.

All the office windows were securely draped with our black curtains; and no lights were burning.

'It must be the lower floor,' said the policeman; and downstairs to the basement they rushed.

Here again all curtains were drawn, and the place was in complete darkness.

The policeman was extremely annoyed, and leapt to a conclusion. These people, he decided, had cunningly switched off the light when they heard his furious bell ringing. Without stopping even to investigate the Buttling's status and responsibility, he now accused the professor of having switched off a light.

The result must have been awful. Professor Buttling saw

red, and literally went off pop to the tune, I am sure, of a fine of fifty pounds had he occupied the whole house. He told the policeman precisely what he thought of his manners; and it is certain that he did this incisively and well with an exquisite attention to both grammar and style. His face had paled; and his red beard stuck out and glowed with wrath. He said he was British, that in Great Britain citizens still had rights although there was now evidence of Nazi and Fascist influence in the land.

As a diversion, probably, Mrs. Buttling audibly wondered if the offending light shone from the first floor; and up the two flights of stairs from the basement they all charged.

The light was discovered and instantly switched off.

The incident should now have ended by the Buttlings explaining that they were tenants with no responsibility in regard to lighting apart from their own third floor flat. Quite properly, it should have been postponed until we could appear to meet the charge; but both the policeman and Professor Buttling were waging war, and neither had any desire for peace.

Apparently, the policeman — an auxiliary officer, again it must be insisted — unaccountably repeated his accusation that Professor Buttling had switched off a light when he rang the bell; and this naturally made Professor Buttling even more fiery with anger, inspiring him to more eloquence regarding jacks-in-office and the horrid tyranny of petty authority when wielded by persons of minor intelligence.

I have yet to understand how the combatants again found themselves in the basement, rather uncomfortably packed in a small bathroom and lavatory leading to our dugout whose door was shut but obviously *not* locked.

Pointing to the door, the policeman demanded that it be opened. Mrs. Buttling, quite willing to oblige, explained

## FRONT TO BACK

that her master key did not fit the lock of the dugout door. Not one of them thought of turning the door knob.

The policeman evidently threatened to smash open the door; but at that moment I, having returned from dinner, and seeing lights below, called kindly down the staircase, 'You're very late, Mrs. Howard; you ought to be home by now!'

Mrs. Howard is our housekeeper who often works late cleaning out the offices and ending with some attention to the main boiler in the basement.

There was no reply; and so I ran down the stairs and found the belligerents in the bathroom and lavatory.

It took some minutes fully to understand what had happened; but not a second to realize that here we had an angry policeman who must be made a calm policeman with the smallest delay if we were to escape trouble and expense. My first task was quickly to arrange a retreat for the unhappy Buttlings, and at all costs to prevent the professor from calling me to his colours. It was easy to love him much more dearly than the policeman at that moment; but the auxiliary policeman controlled the absurd scene, and it had to end with his exit as a happy hero.

It was soon explained to the policeman that my firm were responsible for the house, and I instantly accepted responsibility, pointing out that the Buttlings were in no way concerned.

This had moderate success, but had little effect in modifying either the professor's annoyance with the policeman or the policeman's fury with the professor.

'I must enter that room!' said the policeman, pointing to the dugout door with a cold glance in the direction of the Buttlings.

Without any thought, I stepped into the crush and immediately opened the door — a tactical error which made

the three of them feel foolish. I should, of course, have fumbled with a key and opened the door with affected difficulty. And I think the situation would have been saved had a light been found burning in the dugout; but all the windows and doors were masked with anti-blast screens and the dugout was in darkness.

Turning to the policeman I said, 'Let's go up to my office where we can talk in comfort and I can give you all the information you want. I am sure Professor and Mrs. Buttling want to go back to their flat . . .'

But instantly a perfectly horrible scene developed. Mrs. Buttling left the bathroom and lavatory with becoming dignity; and the professor, instinctively polite, made a gesture offering the policeman the right to leave before him — the kind of thing any gentleman would do.

But the policeman eyed him grimly and said sternly, 'No!'

'What do you mean?' said the professor.

'You,' said the policeman, 'will go first.'

'What on earth do you mean?' repeated the professor.

'I,' said the policeman, 'draw my own conclusions.'

The effect of this was mysterious and awful. Out shot the professor's beard as his eyes gleamed with a tigerish glow.

'You draw your own conclusions!' he snapped, 'and what, may I ask, are they?'

'I repeat — ' said the auxiliary policeman, 'I draw my own conclusions.'

I think they might have spent hours in that dark little bathroom and lavatory discussing the policeman's conclusions if Mrs. Buttling had not said wearily — 'Come — what is the use?'

Professor Buttling thereupon withdrew from the lavatory and followed Mrs. Buttling up the stairs to their own flat,

## FRONT TO BACK

remarking bitterly, yet with a shade of intellectual wonder in his voice, 'He draws his own conclusions!'

Mrs. Buttling made clucking noises of sympathy and remained red in the face.

I then plunged serenely into a warm sea of hypocrisy and proceeded to attempt to charm the policeman into good humour. This was not easy. And I saw how difficult it was at a moment when I paid him the compliment of talking a little common sense, mentioning quite casually that a successful prosecution would be extremely difficult since responsibility for the offending light would be hard to define. I had been out all afternoon; the Buttlings had no right to use the bathroom on the first floor, while the only other tenant, an actress, had left the building at noon and would not return until midnight at the earliest.

The policeman showed slight interest in the actress, envisaging something blonde and slim with pretty ankles; but very coldly, showing depths, or shallows, of character in which there lurked not one spot of humour, he allowed me to see that he had a good case against us which could only be dropped if he, the policeman, decided to show mercy.

I thought of offering him a drink in my flat; but the man was so obviously a bore that I could not face up to his company for long, not even to save the firm the expense of a fine.

He took down many particulars and probed deeply into all our affairs, recording much in his note book which he eventually closed and buried in his breast pocket, remarking that he would have to report the incident which, while very serious indeed, might conceivably be overlooked.

Out in the passage, he spoke sternly of Professor Buttling in a loud voice which filled me with terror, assuring me that it was all he could do to prevent himself from arresting the man for obstruction.

'In the lavatory . . . ?' I asked brightly; and could instantly have bitten off my tongue for the man's mood instantly changed.

Fearing that the Buttlings might yet be on the upper staircase, I gradually ushered him outside the door where, I felt, we might continue, and end, the conversation on the doorstep.

Here he lost all reserve and again attacked the unhappy professor, and I felt perfectly safe in giving him all my sympathy. The professor was in no peril from the law; we were, and I knew it.

The policeman now asked when the actress would be in, being told that the lady usually made her first appearance shortly before noon each day. 'She is very charming,' I said.

This, of course, is true; she is most charming, a comedienne of the Maisie Gay type and probably under fifty — a very tidy, prim, hardworking woman with not an illusion left. But I thought it best not to offer all this information.

When the auxiliary policeman showed signs of returning to his attack on the professor, I chafed him gaily and said, 'I shouldn't worry about him; he's a silly old codger.'

Greatly relieved and rather pleased with my success in composing a very difficult situation, I bade the policeman good night and re-entered the house, intent upon immediately relaxing into truth and sincerity with the good Buttlings to whom I determined to confess my disloyalty, convinced that they would be amused.

But I had hardly entered the hallway before there was a wild and determined charge down the staircase, Professor Buttling as the spearhead with Mrs. Buttling in close and flushed support.

'Did you,' shouted the professor with his beard at a threatening angle, 'tell that policeman I was a silly old codger?'

## FRONT TO BACK

Falling back in surprise I said coldly, 'What a monstrous ideal!'

'And,' pursued the professor, 'if you think I went into that first floor bathroom and left on the light, you are mistaken. I did not.'

This startled me, because it was precisely what I did think, although the suggestion had never crossed my lips; but my nerves were now becoming quite frayed and so I remained silent.

Gradually the professor's red beard became limp as he smiled and remarked, 'Frankly, I don't mind a bit if you did tell that policeman I was a silly old codger if you felt it wise, to get rid of him.'

I thought it right now to give the professor a short lecture on the unwisdom of quarrelling with the police; but he seemed to think that submission to these war-time restrictions when emphasized so rudely by petty officials was outraging a principle, and that very shortly, if we were not careful, we would have a Nazi regime in Britain.

We spent the rest of the evening around the Buttlings' glowing fire, eventually in high good humour as we rehearsed the various scenes. Eventually, by a process of elimination, we tried to find out who had been guilty. Incidentally, the Buttlings had a guest for that night, a genteel spinster who had once been their tenant. She said very little.

'Do you think it was you, yourself?' asked Mrs. Buttling.

'I left the office at four o'clock, before the black-out time,' I said; 'but I was in the bathroom at that time. Now could I have . . .?'

'Well,' said Mrs. Buttling, 'I rather think you could have.'

An hour later, at least an hour after midnight, I crept silently down the heavily carpeted staircase to that first floor

bathroom, determined not to make a creak which might disturb the Buttlings.

Soundlessly, I reached the bathroom door. I opened it rapidly and there in a blaze of light stood the Buttlings' spinster guest, who gave one blood-curdling shriek, crashed the door in my face, and, I expect, fainted comfortably away.

It is said that criminals return to the scene of their crime. If this is true, and if they are clothed as that spinster was clothed, they must find the experience a trifle chilly.

I had several interviews next day with the regular police who were, as ever, perfectly courteous and reasonable. To one very decent sergeant I remarked that his colleague of the night before took his duties very seriously indeed.

'We,' said the sergeant holding up the auxiliary man's note-book, 'can read between the lines, and draw our own conclusions!'

Another experience with the auxiliary police was much more encouraging. Very busy one afternoon, I had not noticed that although it was well past black-out time, I had not drawn the curtains in my own office which faces the street. There was a knock on my door and the handsome young head of a policeman looked in and remarked charmingly, 'Don't you think, sir, that your black-out arrangements are a thought inadequate . . .?' and instantly withdrew as I leapt to the windows.

## CHAPTER II

AFTER six months of this curious warfare, there has been a change in our attitude towards Germany. It had seemed to us, especially when we recalled the cordial reception given by the German people to Mr. Chamberlain in 1938, that the Nazis had deceived the good German people who, when undeceived, would know how to deal with these false leaders. Slowly, but surely, we have come to believe that in the main the German people are behind Hitler. 'It is not the German people we are fighting!' a remark often made in England during the first months of war, is never heard now. After all, Hitler could not be in all the submarines which have drowned sailors, nor has he been flying all the aeroplanes which have machine-gunned fishing vessels and even sailors in open boats. There is no evidence that his orders to murder have been received with revulsion.

And yet we all try to see a true picture of Germany to-day. The newspapers seemed at first to find significance in the fact that rationing began in Germany at once. They suggested, and we could easily agree with them, that if a country had to begin rationing before a war started, its condition would soon be parlous if blockaded. We now know, at least we feel it best to believe, that the German leaders thought it safer to begin an economical system of rationing while there were adequate supplies of food, and thus to maintain at least an adequacy, if necessary, throughout a period of years. We begin to suspect, too, that the German people are more trained to endure privation than we are. Hence it is that reports in our papers of starving, or semi-starving, Germans are not accepted as of much significance.

WINTER 1939-1940

It would appear from accounts we hear that our aeroplanes as such are superior to the German; there is evidence that we can out-fly them and out-fight them; but I have yet to hear anyone in Britain outside the R.A.F., where confidence is supreme and often expressed with delightful nonchalance, admit more than, 'It seems to be all right, so far; but you never know what Hitler has up his sleeve'.

We now believe without much reservation that the submarine menace has been met; and we feel some surprise that Germany persists in sending submarines to areas within reach of our modern detection devices. They do sink some ships; but the cost in morale when so many submarines fail to return must be very high, and hardly worth it.

The magnetic mines caused consternation when their effect was realized; and they still cause trouble; but Mr. Chamberlain has assured us that even this danger has to a large extent been met.

I heard the story before it was published of the discovery of the first magnetic mine found stranded on a mud flat. I cannot vouch for its accuracy because, before reaching mine, it had passed through other heads.

Local guards might have destroyed the mine by rifle fire soon after its discovery; but by good fortune, its presence was reported to the naval section concerned with anti-mine warfare.

With his trousers rolled up like a Cockney at the seaside and followed by sailors towing a box across the mud, a naval officer approached the mine delicately and began taking it to pieces.

Because at any second his work might end abruptly, I was told that this cautious officer sent reports at intervals, with samples, presumably, so that all his initial work might not be lost if he went aloft. One can easily picture him with his spanners and screwdrivers, carefully undoing that mine,

## FRONT TO BACK

doubtless appreciating its exquisite and diabolical arrangements; and one can imagine his relief when the last section was taken down.

It must have been a joyful little procession which squelched its way back to firm land towing the sledge; but in the British way I expect the joy was not apparent. The Germans slipped up here. They should have added an attractive little nut attached to a detonator to undo curiosity.

There were wild stories told in London about these magnetic mines. One man assured me vaguely that each mine contained a small radio; but while he carefully explained the reason for the radio, and what it did, or what he thought it could do, I remained puzzled, as I still am.

There is something truly diabolical in the thought of these infernal machines broadcasting 'Up in the Morning Early' while people under forty physically jerk, to say nothing of 'Lift up your Hearts — A Thought for To-day'; and 'Children's Hour'. However, I feel that the slow pain inflicted by female crooners over the radio seems perfectly in tune with magnetic mines half buried in slime off the Thames; nor are one or two elderly war commentators who have inflicted the obvious and well-known entirely out of harmony.

But although the submarine as a decisive menace has, we think, been met; and although much of the danger in the magnetic mine has been removed, we still feel anxiety when month after month, and week after week, we read of tall ships being sunk near our coasts. Being islanders, we love ships, offering them something of the tenderness and care we show our animals. A warship is fair quarry; but to us the organized sinking of merchantmen, apart from the commercial and economic loss, is revolting. We, thank God, have not to do that.

As far as the army is concerned, we have yet to know how

this generation will fight. We can have no doubts; but our men have got to meet a highly-trained and immense army imbued, it would seem, with a fanatical crusading spirit and possibly impregnated with that fey quality Hitler seems to possess. We have complete confidence in the French; and we think the Maginot Line will not break; but there are many of us who refuse to accept its impregnability as a fact. Always certain that we shall win in the end, we are not unprepared to contemplate a break-through, and to accept even that.

Looking back on the last months, it seems now that the Polish campaign was fought twenty-five years ago; it is difficult to realize that so short a time has passed since Poland was invaded.

A few days before the war started, a London paper published a letter from a Pole living in this country. This gentleman expressed slight amusement with our apparent attitude towards his country and its chances of holding the German attack. He gathered, he wrote, that many people thought Poland would share the fate of 'brave little Belgium', and after assuring us that his country was far from being a 'brave little Belgium' he expressed great respect for the Polish air force, its strength and the excellence of the fighter planes. After giving some impressive figures, he ended a heartening letter with the confident assurance that Poland was capable of holding the German army until counter-measures on the Western Front would relieve pressure.

After reading this letter which breathed common sense and was evidently written by one with knowledge, I expected to see the Poles often in retreat, accepting heavy blows, but eventually absorbing the German attack and holding it at a line of defence. I anticipated some savage biting, even a little chewing; but not a furious gulp and complete digestion.

## FRONT TO BACK

Even when the German advance had gone far into Poland, I was able to comfort younger people, distressed when city after city fell, by remarking with some attempt at facetiousness that people of my generation had been equally unhappy when Lodz, Cracow and Warsaw, to say nothing of Przemysl, were menaced and occasionally fell. They had all figured as disasters in the Great War without changing its certain march to our victory. And no one, then as now, had dared to pronounce Polish names with confidence.

But before we could settle down to a calm contemplation of the campaign, it was over; and we had to admit that it was carried out and won brilliantly without seriously affecting the strength of the German army unless, which just might be true, and might explain our own freedom from German air attack, Germany used much of her vast reserve of petroleum. If this is true, the Polish campaign may in the end prove to be a major disaster for Germany.

It is impossible to think of Russia's share in Poland's defeat without disgust. I have read the Polish White Book which offers all the suspense of first rate fiction, even while every word rings true; and it is almost impossible to believe that human nature can sink to so low a depth.

I have often wondered if Russia's move was contemplated in Berlin. It would appear to be certain that a partition had been arranged, but I incline to the view that Germany had agreed to settle Poland alone, and to hand over Russia's share at the close of the campaign. Possibly Stalin thought Germany might be tempted not to pause at the Russian frontier, and kindly removed this temptation by acting himself. He was wise.

I am convinced that had Germany been free to do so, she could have marched into Russia without much difficulty and settled to her liking the affairs of that country. Her mechanized army with its terrific speed in manœuvre, the

efficiency of her air force when freed from the attention of the R.A.F. might easily have achieved a successful blitzkrieg. The internal combustion machine has made the study of former attempts to invade Russia more interesting than useful. Possibly the success of the machine army has surprised even Germany.

The quick collapse of Poland shocked us in Britain; and we find great difficulty in understanding how so large an army could fall so quickly. Evidently the Poles were badly led. Still, it would have been hard for them instantly to retreat from their frontiers to the magnificent defensive line their country offered; but that, surely, was their only hope of holding the German attack which found the Polish army distended over vast indefensible positions, ripe to have practised upon it what seems to have been the A.B.C. of tactics.

It is easy to talk after the event; at this stage we do not know what advice the Polish generals received from the Allied commanders. A brilliant plan of campaign may have been conceived, a plan which just failed to come off.

We are far from happy about Poland in this country. A young Polish refugee in London, an air force pilot, said to me the other day in a bold attempt at English, 'England ees not queek!'

There are two pictures we cannot see without pain. One shows troops of young Polish men skipping and dancing through the streets of Warsaw, celebrating the news which had just reached them that France and England had declared war on Germany. The second, more poignant, is the moving picture of those last days in Warsaw, when the mayor of the city urged us to hurry to his country's relief.

Incredible as it may seem, it would look as if those unhappy people in Warsaw actually believed we were hastening to their aid.

## FRONT TO BACK

Doubtless, Mr. Chamberlain and M. Daladier were wise still to give the Nazis a chance to withdraw by waiting nearly three days before declaring war; but those of us without the responsibility of giving the order which must destroy countless thousands of our young men would have found '*De l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace!*' more in harmony with our feelings just then.

Many of us believe, while instantly admitting an ignorance of underlying facts, that a much more audacious demonstration against the German lines during the first few days of the war might have had some effect in helping the Poles. But almost in the same breath we admit that in this Nazi war no chances may be taken. We must win. General Gamelin doubtless sees that French audacity in 1870 as in 1914 proved disastrous in the former and very costly in the latter.

And, of course, and this is said gently; we feel bound to consider that had the war begun a year earlier with Czechoslovakia as the distressed maiden, Poland would have escaped ruin. Upon which side, we can ask ourselves, would Poland's leaders have fought? We can recall some irritation when, during that trouble, and midst the fog of those days, Poland acted in a way which seemed far from attractive. There may have been an explanation. She may have foreseen the days to come, and tried to grab what she could for her own future defence. Possibly our deep sympathy for the unhappy Czechoslovakia blinded us to the realities in the menacing situation as far as Poland was concerned.

But now all that has to be forgotten; apparently the new Polish Government established in France is built on democratic lines, and after the restoration, the Poles are to enjoy democratic government.

We hear much these days about democracy and its many advantages; and we are often assured how much we have

appreciated it. Possibly we have; certainly it permits us to climb to Heaven or to sink to Hell in our own way without interference; but in this our dear Britain, many of us think democracy needs some tightening up and drastic improvement.

All that underlies 'the liberty of the subject' is precious; but should, for instance, a wealthy press magnate have liberty to live in perfect comfort, to offer his children all the good treasure found in education and a first rate cultural environment, and at the same time have liberty to increase his paper's circulation, and consequently his advertisement revenue, by offering the masses sentimental rubbish merely because, he explains, they want rubbish. The profits are enormous; but the reason is bad. There are book publishers and theatre magnates who enjoy similar liberty.

I think the idea of one man one vote is magnificent; but democracy will have much more chance of running smoothly and effectively for all if the vote were reserved only for those, of all classes and both sexes, capable of passing a compulsory examination on simple general knowledge; what would amount to an average intelligence test. In the coming brave new world, it will be a capital offence for a parliamentary candidate to wander about his constituency before the election kissing other people's babies, and doing all those other bland things under the general heading of kissing other people's babies.

Democracy is being tried to-day; it should not be found wanting because it, in itself, is all the power; but unless it tidies itself up and dissociates freedom from spiritual, mental and physical laxity, it will be found wanting and may not survive the trial, irrespective of an Allied or German victory.

During the boredom and agony of the last six months, it was not even uncommon to hear thoroughly loyal, if

## FRONT TO BACK

thoughtless, working people say, 'Well, will it make much difference to us if Hitler wins? Have we much to lose? This is a rich man's war; but we pay for it.'

If Doctor Goebbels heard that he might rub his hands and decide that the British working people were showing signs of disaffection. He could not be more mistaken. The British people will fight even while they grumble. Nevertheless, even while I could always convince my friends that an Hitlerian victory would make a fatal difference to them, that, very definitely, it was not a rich man's war, I could secretly admit that many of them, having very little and so often pursued by Fear, even while they give their sons and brothers to fight for the country, surely, deserve much, much more from life than they are given in this land of boundless wealth. And yet even while one thinks of this, one also has to admit that during the past years in Britain much had been done to improve conditions and much that must be done was being tackled.

It might be urged that if a country can spend almost countless millions to win a final military victory, might not a similar effort be made to win human contentment for all. The effort could be made, of course; but human selfishness is a much more subtle enemy than a dozen Hitlers, and all the money in the world would have the value of sand if used to fight that.

The above are not merely my own thoughts. Again and again I have heard wealthy people, once hide-bound Tories, express the deepest appreciation of the courage shown by working people, expressed in no patronizing way; often, it seemed, with a feeling of deep shame that much more had not been done for them.

I believe in Mr. Chamberlain, and when he is occasionally attacked, I find myself picking up the cudgels for him and letting fly often without very much reserve. I feel that the

WINTER 1939-1940

great mass of the working people are behind him, chiefly because they are convinced that he will pursue our purpose to the end. Nevertheless, with the exception of Mr. Churchill, whose superb entertainment value these days when he talks about 'the Nazis' (with a sombre snarl) is nearly equal to his great drive and ability to get things done, no other member of the cabinet strikes me as being particularly inspired. They appear to be a collection of worthy bores although Mr. Hore-Belisha had a certain glitter before we lost him.

Mr. Hore-Belisha's disappearance from the Cabinet startled people, but only for a few days. No good reasons being offered, many were instantly invented; the most shocking being that during the War Minister's visit to the forces in France he had annoyed General Gamelin by criticizing that great Frenchman's work.

I expect that when the war is over and the Great Ones begin writing memoirs those of us who survive will know. I confess to little admiration for Mr. Hore-Belisha although, judging from the Press, he is a man of great drive and initiative. I know his chauffeuse, a film star incidentally and an oyster if ever there was one; who beyond telling me of one awful occasion when she drove the bonnet of Mr. Hore-Belisha's car into the light fence protecting a grounded barrage balloon in St. James's Park during the black-out, and only just avoiding a collision with the balloon, remains entirely discreet. She has the highest respect and admiration for her chief.

I told her that I did not like her chief very much, and she asked for a reason.

I replied that I did not like his shoes, and was instantly accused of frivolity; yet I could find no other reason in my complete ignorance of his work. I had merely seen a Press picture of the gentleman coming down the steps of the War

## FRONT TO BACK

Office, smiling very pleasantly and obviously delighted simply, to be. Wide, well-cut striped trousers flowed pleasantly down to patent leather shoes with suede tops; and the patent leather shoes with suede tops had stolen the scene.

Had the ex-film star chauffeuse driven Mr. Hore-Belisha into that barrage balloon with a consequent explosion, he would have awakened deep sympathy in all our breasts; but undeniably there would have been a certain completeness about so startling a contretemps.

### CHAPTER III

THE people of Finland accepted Russia's peace terms a few days ago and, obviously, we in London were deeply interested. Although our newspapers have told us of the deep depression prevailing in Finland, and while we can sympathize with that unhappy country, many of us feel honest relief. It could have been so much worse. The complete Bolshevization of the country and the enslavement of its people had seemed probable, almost inevitable. It has become almost an axiom that a national spirit cannot be destroyed, that the spirit of freedom is bound to survive and eventually to triumph; but I wonder if that is true to-day when men like Stalin and Hitler desire otherwise.

It would have been a good thing for the Allies had Finland been able to continue the struggle and thus to have kept Russia engaged; but we in Britain, or many of us, have not sufficiently enjoyed the daily story of death and destruction coming from the North during the last few months to make us decide that its continuance, despite an indirect advantage to us, would be anything else but a bad thing.

The Finns won more than one amazing victory; had their success been less they must have lost their freedom; but I think they won their greatest victory when they refused to appeal formally to the Allies for help.

The Finnish imagination is evidently well developed, much more so, evidently, than that of some of our own people who, without much concern for geographical facts, deplore our failure to rush to Finland's aid. Those who moaned about the 'betrayal of Czecho-Slovakia' now talk, admittedly with less confidence, of the betrayal of Finland. One can sympathize more with the young soldiers who

## FRONT TO BACK

volunteered to join the proposed expeditionary force. They are deeply disappointed, and some of them blame the Government for denying them the chance to have a smack at someone, somewhere.

As a gesture by the Allies, an attempt to save Finland would have been magnificent; but in effect it might have proved a dangerous trap and a major disaster. The merchant marine, already bearing an incredible burden, always forced to contend with a brutal, powerful and irresponsible enemy, would have been asked to double its work in maintaining perilous and distended lines of communication across the North Sea; and with frightened neutrals in Norway and Sweden threatened by Germany in command of the Baltic, it is difficult to imagine an expeditionary force of a hundred thousand men having much effective striking power at its spearhead. In the end, it might have meant an army of a million attempting to salve the first hundred thousand.

And how Germany would have laughed!

The Gallipoli adventure would have seemed a pleasant water excursion compared with what Finland might have proved.

The British people have a long memory. Finland shall not be forgotten when the Nazi war reaches its logical conclusion.

How we talk these days! How the world chatters! No matter what is said, nor by whom; the rest of the world listens and obediently shudders or purrs.

A controlled Press and radio is without doubt a menace to freedom and most probably useless in effect; but a free Press and radio often seems the choice of the lesser evil.

A free Press will permit the people to swallow anything, no matter how preposterous, silly or sentimental; but a rigidly controlled Press allows them to believe only the worst.

It is all very difficult, one of the imponderables; but when one reads, or tries not to read, much of the drivel which stains good newsprint one longs for some kind of benign control — the writing of a firm, yet beautifully polite, note from supreme authority, fabulously wise and fair, to a newspaper offending against good taste — 'If you do that again, we shall prohibit your selling advertising space.'

If only news which is interesting, informative, and stimulating could be printed, we should be happier. Unfortunately mischievous news has an attractive liveliness, and sells.

After Finland had made peace, her leaders spoke with an economy of words which could have been a lesson to other national leaders not far from home. They expressed gratitude to Britain and France, and gently pointed out the insurmountable difficulties between our help and their salvation. Quiet people here were deeply grateful; but even quiet people in the United Kingdom could easily have been led astray by the remarks made by the American Senator, Henrik Shipstead, which were flashed throughout the British Empire and given prominence even in otherwise reputable newspapers.

'These are harsh terms,' said this gentleman, according to British papers which, admittedly, bracketed him as an isolationist, 'but what could Finland do? She had been deserted by Britain and France. They are all a bunch of crooks.'

Why should so obviously a silly statement be reprinted? Stalin's terms, from Stalin, were not harsh. Britain and France could not desert Finland because they had never been with her. Mr. Shipstead's concluding sentence has the eloquence of a sneeze.

What good could the reporting of Senator Henrik Shipstead possibly do? None whatever. But mischief could

## FRONT TO BACK

be made, driving the less informed people of this country to the wholly false conclusion that the American people are not essentially with us in our fight.

It is difficult for those of us who have not travelled to appreciate the situation in the United States during this war. Many of us merely know that if America were in any danger, there would be no hesitation here. The truth is that a century or two must pass before we begin to accept the implications of the successful rebellion of the American colonies. All will admit at once that the United States form a sovereign nation not even in treaty with Britain; but the admission is quite superficial and means very little.

As far as this war is concerned Sir Cecil Spring-Rice's remark during the last still seems to hold good as far as I can judge — the danger is that if 80 per cent of Americans are in favour of the Allies, they are in favour of them as we are in favour of church-going; while the remaining 20 per cent are in favour of Germany as we are in favour of eating our dinners.

And I think Americans who think cannot refuse to accept some blame for the troubles in the world to-day. American politicians, *not* the American people, murdered the League of Nations, the only hope for the crippled world of 1918. The League had no hope of survival without the United States, and I could never understand why the rest of us went on with it. I was in the United States in 1920, and it seemed clear to me that all Americans who really thought shared our distress. In 1918, America was offered the leadership of a pathetic world, sadly in need of a shepherd. American politicians, *not* the American people, refused the charge and the sheep have wandered towards destruction.

In June 1933 a World Economic Conference was called. It was opened by King George V in a magnificent speech,

tremendously effective in its reserved power. I can still hear that speech, and I can still recall the wonder I felt that the King, who once called himself 'a very ordinary fellow', could say everything that had to be said in so few well chosen words. Again there was hope for a world destroying itself, and aware of self-destruction, in innumerable conflicting interests and petty national ambitions. And there was evidence that all were sincere in a desire to find a way out.

Came a message from President Franklin Roosevelt to the American delegates; and the Conference was wrecked, wrecked within minutes of the receipt of that message. I sometimes wonder if the President, very popular in this country, ever endures some dark moments when he recalls his action that dark day. Of course the Conference might have failed in any case; but there had been a chance of success.

Most of us who try to think here fully appreciate the help America might give us as an ally at this time; nevertheless we hope that it will not be necessary to call for a full-dress alliance. We can gladly accept aid in making war; but the thought of American aid in making peace is little short of repugnant. We have been taught a sad lesson.

It is easy to picture a future Peace Conference with American delegates of superb ability finding a way which would lead to permanent peace; but whatever they plan, no matter how brilliant the scheme, it is bound to demand American national aid with consequent responsibility. The welcome home of the American delegates might be happier than that offered to the unfortunate President Wilson; but I doubt it.

There will be politicians jockeying for positions of power, dragging up ancient traditions of isolation, twisting the lion's tail and performing all the old tricks which can

## FRONT TO BACK

attract votes and which will win them their brief moment of power at the expense of our years of pain.

God forbid that the American people should ever be forced to suffer as European peoples suffer; but until they do, it is unlikely that they will take any risk, even on behalf of the noblest purpose, which may involve them in war. Dare we blame them?

War is bad, a monstrous, uncivilized way of settling any question. I can pray, 'Oh God, let this thing pass quickly, and let there be light in our darkness'; but at the same time I can see being born around me a finer Britain, a more earnest Britain, and, I think, a cleaner Britain than there was before September 1939.

Like many others here, I often contemplate the Peace Conference in one of the years to come; and with others I say, 'At all costs let us treat the German people kindly, because in that lies our only hope'.

And yet with kindness, there must be firmness and the clear-cut intention never to permit them to be armed again. Personally, I shudder at the thought of French troops occupying even an acre of Germany; not because I do not think Germany deserves to suffer the humiliation and pain she has inflicted on Frenchmen, but simply because I believe that the German people must be trained out of their attitude of mind if we are to sleep quietly in our beds; and the infliction of revenge, no matter how justified, will do no good whatever.

I have enough faith in my own country to believe that a lasting peace could be made if negotiated between Britain and Germany alone; but it is a little hopeless to anticipate that we shall exchange our merely polite and kindly attitude towards other nations for a responsible policy designed to insist upon peace for all peoples. The British Empire has been a stabilizing, good-natured influence in the world; but

it has not honestly accepted the responsibility of its immense power.

Incidentally, I have not much hesitation in saying that despite all the revolting cruelty inflicted by the Nazis, there is no really deep-seated dislike of Germany amongst the British people at this time; and I more than half suspect that Great Britain really inspires respect among the German people, including Hitler. I believe that if a British army occupied Germany to-morrow, the next day would see the Tommies on excellent terms of friendship with the Jerries, their wives, their mothers and their sisters.

On one gloomy day, February 23rd, the London *Daily Telegraph* reprinted a letter by Mr. Lawrence Hunt which had been sent to the *New York Times*. I should like to reproduce the complete letter here, but that is not possible. Actually the letter expressed the point of view of the very many American people I have known and loved. I mentioned it that evening to General Montague of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He said, 'Hey! I saw that letter; it's the kind of thing you want to cut out, and to keep in your pocket book, so that you can refer to it.'

I immediately took the cutting from my pocket book.

The concluding passages which I quote can give no idea of the scope of Mr. Hunt's letter, of its brilliant smashing down of carelessly held ideas in the United States regarding the Nazi war, ideas with foundations no stronger than the printed word of this clever ignorant one, and that scribe with the ready pen, who strove to stimulate and interest during the last twenty years.

The fashion of our present-day propagandists is to sneer at Uncle Sam for acting in 1917 the role of the Good Samaritan. According to these people, the Good Samaritan was a fool and a 'sucker'. He actually

## FRONT TO BACK

inconvenienced himself in doing his share as a member of the human family. There were no profits in what he did. But the Levite was the 'wise guy'. He 'minded his own business' and went his own way. Didn't lose a nickel.

Perhaps Uncle Sam should do the same. I don't think he will. He isn't that sort of fellow. In due course he'll rub his eyes, stand up, take off his coat and do a man's job in a hard but worthwhile world.

#### CHAPTER IV

‘WELL, when do you think the war’s going to end, and how?’ is a question we often ask each other.

About three years is the average estimate with some slight hope of a surprising development which might shorten that time; and most people agree that the Third Reich will collapse in a revolution producing an unpleasant muddle which, in view of the brooding gaze of Stalin and his gang, may be difficult to compose.

It is often pointed out that a purely defensive attitude towards Germany will not reduce her to that verge of collapse which would make a revolution possible; but this can be answered by insisting upon our navy’s inherent victory in its unchallengeable power.

The blockade is the result of that power; and the blockade will sooner or later force an admission of the navy’s victory. We feel safe in assuming that Germany’s alleged superiority in air power will not vitally affect the final result. We have, incidentally, some quite good aircraft of our own.

The visit of Mr. Sumner Welles to this country created great interest; and while some people lightly recalled the Ford Peace Ship during the former German eruption, most of us felt that President Roosevelt had acted wisely in boldly sending an envoy to gain first hand knowledge of our struggle.

It is absurd to admit any parallel with the Court of King Solomon and that of ex-Corporal Hitler; nevertheless, the latter has received some important men in his day but not, up to date, Queen Salote of Tonga, the only reigning Queen left in her capital.

Newspaper men over here had a delightful, if very

## FRONT TO BACK

difficult, time with Mr. Sumner Welles who seemed proof against every conceivable trap to force admissions; but whatever he did was news and we were entertained quite as much as we expected to be.

We heard all about the envoy's English valet who was forced to remain in Switzerland, quite a neat little story that; and as proof of Mr. Sumner Welles's excellent taste in clothes, we heard that he had deep conferences with his tailors in Saville Row. He played golf, too, with Mr. Kennedy.

Yet while we eagerly read these trivialities, we were yet well aware of the deep implications of this momentous visit. Incidentally, the publisher who publishes Mr. Sumner Welles's book during the next peace will account himself a lucky man. There should be a fortune in it.

My own guess is that Hitler told the gentleman that he would make peace with the Allies at once if they would agree to abandon all interference with his purely European designs; but that if they refused to make peace, he would smash them. I believe that he assured Mr. Sumner Welles of his sincere desire to abandon the conflict, hinting that the latter might convey this information to London and Paris. After offering Mr. Sumner Welles what he thought to be proof of his ability to destroy us, he dismissed the gentleman, who thereupon proceeded on his way.

Undoubtedly, the American envoy collected more information from other sources in Germany.

When, during his visit to London, it was learnt that Mr. Sumner Welles would again be in contact with the Nazis through Italian channels, I felt that my own foretelling of events to friends showed signs of coming true.

It might be interesting to record this now, and to leave it on record, whatever happens.

I always feel that Hitler is still the leader of a movement

in Germany but not the German leader. I feel that the prominent men in the German army and navy, of the officer caste, cannot but regard him as essentially the common Austrian corporal. He has been useful to them. Magically, he can control the masses; and since these *canaille* have to be controlled and efficiently organized for cannon fodder, Hitler assumes the value of a godsend.

'Let him lead!' they can be imagined whispering if only to themselves; 'his way is our way, and we shall follow because his way is ours.'

I can see them, too, being vastly impressed by his incredible success. 'Stout fellow, y'know — wonderful how the people eat from his hand.'

And so from event to event they have followed him, probably not deceiving him when they in turn have led when he has demanded their leadership — still with him on the successful road, charmingly unbending, yet cordial and respectful to the ex-corporal who is serving their turn.

Why oppose him? Because of mere caste laws?

Many of them recalled 1918, when caste and all it meant had singularly little interest for the German people.

But when the Third Reich found itself after seven months of war in very much the same position as the Reich of Kaiser William, with the Allies in command of the sea, a command as effective now as then; not seriously affected by the development of aircraft, and now able to meet the submarine menace and the magnetic mine peril, I suspect the attitude of the German army leaders changed.

They dared not take decisive action. Hitler, they knew, had an effective way of dealing with opposition which might involve his regime, and, of course, his life — an important point — and there was as yet no need to risk their lives or power. They contented themselves, therefore, in advising that they saw only a logical climax to the present war unless

## FRONT TO BACK

peace were made promptly. Politely and humbly, doubtless, they asked him to negotiate with the Allies; seizing the opportunity of the Sumner Welles visit; hinting that unless peace were made on suitable Hitlerian terms, it might be as well for the officers to take over the government of the country.

I assume that Mr. Sumner Welles had been assured in London by Mr. Chamberlain that Great Britain had not the slightest intention of negotiating with Hitler; and when this information was bluntly conveyed to Hitler, his conference with Mussolini at the Brenner was concerned only with war.

Hitler, I believe, is aware that this is his last chance. Something must be done immediately to maintain his prestige, literally 'to show' the officers. I cannot conceive what this may be in view of the Maginot Line and British naval supremacy; I merely feel that the move will be exciting, glittering, and doomed, eventually, to failure.

Mussolini was, of course, given his entrance cue; but it is probable that Mussolini's promise to act is contingent upon the successful culmination of his partner's early scenes. The brave Italian leader will doubtless cancel his engagement if the play shows any promise of failing.

I anticipate that when the great German military commanders replace Hitler, if there is time between his demise and the country's collapse into revolution, they will offer instantly to end the war; agreeing to restore both Poland and Czecho-Slovakia, and to be reasonable about Austria; but, please God, their offers will have no attraction for us unless they can give guarantees which will make it impossible for Germany ever to dictate her will upon weaker peoples.

When this war is over, I foresee peace lasting fifty years. Towards the end of that period, control will have slackened;

and if there are Germans, pleasant people as many of them are, they will have leaders who once more will attempt to assert their wills.

As far as I can judge, the only hope for permanent peace short of German extermination, is to let the Prussians take charge, to permit them to prance as masters throughout the earth until from within, through the slow-moving influence of environment and contact with civilized peoples, they learn their lesson.

However, because this process would be extremely uncomfortable, if not fatal, to those alive in the world outside Germany, perhaps the plan had better not be followed!

We shall be very unhappy in Britain if Mussolini leads the Italians against us. Apart from the extreme inconvenience of losing the services of excellent restaurant managers and waiters, we shall find ourselves trying to destroy people against whom we owe no serious grudge. My own impression is that we should have offered Mussolini the choice between immediate war and a guaranteed peace last September.

He would probably have accepted the latter, to the advantage of all; although it is more than half suspected here that our sailors look forward to giving his bright new navy a spot of training in the Mediterranean.

On the whole, we can hardly blame Mussolini, the man. His position is extremely difficult. When Germany is beaten in one of the far distant to-morrows, dictators should be unfashionable in Europe for a time, and the 'swollen bull-frog of the Pontine Marshes' cannot contemplate himself as a burnt sacrifice with any pleasure.



P A R T   T H R E E

S P R I N G   1 9 4 0



## CHAPTER I

AFTER we had absorbed the shock of the German invasion of Denmark, and before we could fully appreciate the situation in Norway, we in Britain prepared with some excitement and pleasure to contemplate the exactions of penalties which outraged principles of warfare must inevitably demand. In this desperate sally from his beleaguered country, Hitler was obviously trusting in his luck; but luck, we felt, could hardly be concerned with a mad adventure which left vulnerable lines of communication exposed to the attention of the British navy.

A friend said to me, 'Hitler is an Austrian peasant who knows nothing of the sea; it will drown him!' And a colonel I lunched with arranged his fingers into the form of pincers and remarked with stern exultation. 'We shall nip him — like that!'

The colonel is a retired colonel.

Inevitably, we endured much talk in the newspapers and over the radio about German aggression and Nazi barbarity; but few of us were impressed. The Nazis might attempt to save their souls by fighting fairly and decently; but because they know their lives are forfeit if they sit still and wait for the slow rot of the blockade to give the German people enough hysterical impulse to tear them limb from limb, they must abandon all considerations of honour and mercy.

We felt deeply sorry for the unhappy Danes to whom we could offer no aid. We have long forgiven the aggression which burnt the cakes in King Alfred's day, and now regard the Danes with some of the affection we offered their princess who became our lovely Queen Alexandra. It is true that many of us have associated Denmark only with excellent

## FRONT TO BACK

bacon and London eggs, but all of us enjoy the picture which periodically appears of the very tall Danish king riding a very tall horse through the streets of Copenhagen. The picture of the Danish subjugation is an unlovely one which Germans in the future may regard with deep shame; so admirable a little country, almost defenceless, being crushed by a powerful bully! However, Germany will eventually pay. Until she can realize that there are some easy tasks which simply may not be attempted by the strong, she can never attain ultimate success.

The position of Norway was different. We could help the Norwegians by taking speedy vengeance on the scoundrels who had ravaged their land and, we hoped, seize a heaven-sent chance to get at an enemy who had desperately placed himself within our grasp.

Norway's partially detached geographical position, her extensive coast line, would give her time to contain an invasion which, under such difficult conditions, must take days to achieve any useful results even without the grim attention of our powerful naval forces who would obviously sweep clear both the Kattegat and Skager Rak of hostile transports and their escorting naval units.

News from Scandinavia remained confused for some hours; it eventually became fantastic. We heard first that Oslo was threatened, that the civil population was being evacuated; and then, within a short interval, that evacuation had been stopped — by the Germans who apparently held the town, with a brass band. King Haakon had left his capital, and was being pursued by German aeroplanes.

Eventually, it became clear that not only Oslo but also Bergen, Trondheim and even Narvik had been captured by German naval forces supported by units of the army.

The effect was that of a one act play whose author is bound to crowd events into the space of less than an hour, even to

risk the devastating effect of coincidence, in order to reach a fitting climax and a good curtain.

Hitler's Norwegian plan of campaign was stained with treachery and low cunning; but we are bound to admit that in ordering his navy to carry out a mission almost under the guns of a much more powerful naval force, he called for superb courage which was not withheld. We dare not refuse a salute to the German sailors who so gallantly offered so much that was splendid, to the point of supreme self-sacrifice, on behalf of a cause so miserable.

The big question which now occupied our minds was when should we hit back. Our confidence that we would most certainly do so was evidently shared by neighbouring neutrals whose reporters blithely anticipated our counter-offensive by flooding the world's press with glowing accounts of British successes in all the occupied ports. One delightful report spoke of an ultimatum to the Germans in Oslo to leave the Norwegian capital within a number of hours.

None of these reports was officially confirmed, but the B.B.C., without emphasized warning that they should not yet be accepted, joined with the newspapers in giving them prominence.

It was suggested later that they emanated from German sources, a subtle form of propaganda designed to deepen the effect of the truth when that should emerge. This may, conceivably, be true; although I doubt it. But even if it is true, it cannot excuse our leaders for permitting so much that was cheerful and heartening, and quite untrue, to be released when they must have known that the Germans were enjoying an outstanding success.

Coming events cast their shadows before them, notably alarming events. The first rather chilling shadow we felt was immediately after the first Battle of Narvik when the Admiralty issued a communiqué which smelt of a valiant

## FRONT TO BACK

failure; and although Mr. Chamberlain's statement in the House that afternoon brought a warmer light to bear on the battle during which, he said, seven German transports had been sunk and some Nazi destroyers successfully attacked, there was a dawning fear in Britain that all might not be well in Norway.

The Prime Minister explained that in a statement shortly to be made, Mr. Churchill would give further information.

And still the cheerful reports continued to be published in Britain almost within hours of Mr. Churchill's statement, although the B.B.C. now began pointedly to insist that they were not confirmed. From this time, people in Britain began to doubt all good news and to accept bad without much question.

Until this time, both the Prime Minister and the First Lord of the Admiralty had seldom failed to enrich their statements with heartening news; so that some of us can hardly be blamed for hoping that Mr. Churchill would be privileged to inform us that effective counter-measures had been taken to abort Nazi audacity.

Alas, Mr. Churchill could tell us very little beyond denying that Norwegian ports had been recaptured by us. Explaining that naval operations of a vast and complicated kind were proceeding, making any definite statement inadvisable, he went on to do the very best he could for us by assuring us that every German ship in the Kattegat and Skager Rak would be sunk, and that we should take any ports we needed on the western coast of Norway whenever we wanted to.

It is not difficult to see his point of view, nor to doubt his faith; but it was also possible to sense in his statement something approaching bewilderment, as of a man assuredly strong contending with the mysterious and inexplicable; what we later saw to be Hitler's genius, his ability to com-

mand fanatical obedience from his people, a fanaticism quite unconcerned with insuperable difficulty.

Followed days of anxious waiting, days which many of us recall with some distress. The chill of that vast Nazi shadow was now lightly sweeping over this our Britain.

But for a time that shadow was glowingly dissipated when news of the second Battle of Narvik reached us late on the night of Sunday, April 14th.

Martha has usually retired from her battlefield in the kitchen to the peace of her bed-sitting room when I come in from my usual walk with the dogs between ten-thirty and eleven; but on that Sunday evening, I found the kitchen brightly lighted and its usually intensely warm air alive with gay Gilbert and Sullivan music from her radio.

She met me with excitement in her eyes as she said, 'They say there's going to be an important announcement at any minute, and we are to stand by. They're just playing a few tunes to pass the time.'

The gaiety and cheer in the records chosen by the B.B.C. presaged good news; but when I recalled the last time I heard many Gilbert and Sullivan records played one after the other, on board a sinking liner in the Pacific, I determined to control any happy anticipations. That liner sank.

However, we know intimately our B.B.C. uncles and brothers; and there was definitely a note of pleased excitement in the voice urging us between records to wait a little longer.

At last came the good news, a wonderful story; the story of the second Battle of Narvik. We could still fight; we could easily sink and destroy Nazi warships and make a thorough job of it. It was what we expected from the navy; there was no surprise in our joy.

I have a deep appreciation of Martha; but I am bound to admit that it is quite impossible to rejoice greatly with her

## FRONT TO BACK

about any event because of her determined habit of charging off on conversational tangents which take her by easy stages even as far as the Boer War. Therefore, being otherwise alone in the farm-house, I felt bound to telephone to all I knew in the neighbourhood lest they should have missed the good news.

Curiously no one I reached had; telephones were often engaged as friends sought friends to share their joy. It is fortunate that I had no visitors that week-end; we might have had bad heads the following morning.

Finally, I rushed to the piano and finding 'O God our help in ages past', played it straight through at moderate speed without a serious mistake — a resounding musical victory; it usually takes me upwards of a month to master a hymn.

The news that night spoke of men seen rushing from Narvik over the snow-covered hills, suggesting that the German garrison was on the run. It would be quickly replaced, we were confident, by British forces.

As it turned out, we were mistaken. Apparently the German forces returned to Narvik as surprised, doubtless, as we were when it seemed clear that the navy's gallant work had not been driven home. It looked almost as if our leaders had decided to have a victory merely in passing, to relieve the monotony of the struggle.

Again we endured days of waiting made harder to bear by the taciturnity of the few communiqués the Admiralty and War Office could spare us. Great events were happening, or should be happening, we knew, in Scandinavia; but we, to whom the issue of the campaign meant so much, were told less than nothing.

Eventually, a communiqué stated, 'British troops have landed at various points on the Norwegian coast', and let it go at that, allowing us and all the military and naval experts of all the newspapers to bemuse ourselves trying to guess

which ports we had decided to subtract from the Nazis. Mr. Churchill had been confident of our power to choose.

More days passed; and still we remained in ignorance. Actually, we were never directly given geographical information about the landings. The information emerged when a plainly deteriorating situation forced the hands of our leaders.

The reason urged for this reserve was the danger of giving information to the enemy, a stupid enough reason it seemed later when we gathered that the German bombers had all the information they wanted, and used it with deadly effect.

In the meantime, we continued guessing. Despite the fact that Narvik, the scene of our naval glory, remained shrouded in an aura of obstinate mystery, we felt certain that a landing had been made there.

We all fully appreciated the urgency of the moment. Contact simply had to be made with the struggling Norwegians in Southern Norway before the Nazis could be fully organized and equipped.

Yet even while we waited and hoped, news reached us hourly which seemed to show that our enemies were going about their invasion with superb efficiency, apparently not seriously worried by any threat we could offer to their vulnerable lines of communication.

We continued to wonder and to guess. In one of the to-morrows before us we still hoped to find an effective success, even while we endured the fear that, constituted as we were, a free society of people with more power than wisdom in the making and unmaking of our leaders, we could have no hope of avoiding a long struggle in our effort to destroy a highly disciplined enemy whose leader enjoyed unquestioned power. He could act swiftly; our speed, potentially greater, must be seriously affected by fumbling.

However, at this time I comforted myself with the thought

## FRONT TO BACK

that our leaders were designedly avoiding a merely glittering display of military and naval strength. They were evidently organizing a wonderful plan which would result in final disaster for the Germans.

And, after all, if one looked calmly at the Norwegian situation, the horizon was far from dark even if one could forget the victory at Narvik which had assuredly shown what our navy could do if given the chance to take chances. Incidentally, this decisive naval victory had, in some curious way, wandered off into history as a glorious event detached from the present struggle: symptomatic, had we been able to read events clearly, of a blurred picture before the eyes of our leaders.

The Norwegians had refused to submit to a *fait accompli* and were putting up the best fight they could under fantastic circumstances. Once they could be effectively armed and strengthened, their local knowledge would be invaluable.

From our point of view, the weakest factor in the situation was the welcome offered the invaders by some Norwegians. Some of us found this hard to understand, and expressed contempt for the Norse; but others pointed out that the Nazis were not utterly friendless in Great Britain, an obnoxious thought irresistibly associated with the profile of Oswald Mosley.

The early news from Norway after the mysterious landing was cheerful enough. Norwegian army orders-of-the-day were full of confidence, giving inspiriting assurances of Allied aid. 'The power of Britain' evidently meant much to Norwegian soldiers.

There was an impression as of stabilization, of a brake on German speed. One pleasant item spoke in gossiping strain of the financial arrangements made whereby Allied currency could be exchanged for Norwegian, giving us a homely vision of Tommies and Poilus exchanging their shillings or

francs for souvenirs in the small shops of winter sports centres, and flirting with those gaily dressed Norwegian peasant maidens who occasionally adorn the *National Geographic Magazine*.

On the whole, we could see no insuperable obstacle to the recapture of the occupied Norwegian territory by native and Allied forces. In view of the enemy's highly vulnerable lines of communication across the Kattegat and Skager Rak, the campaign seemed to us in Britain to offer excellent chances of success. Our confidence was only modified by what seemed an amazing reserve on the part of Allied commanders.

It would take time, of course. In time, the German forces would feel the pinch. After a time, invincible factors would play their part. In time, the struggle would revert to the main battle-field in Northern France.

We have since learnt, as we only began to suspect then, that the German High Command had this much respect for time: they proposed to defeat it and then to compress it, like air in a siphon; even to give it the overwhelming power of air in a siphon.

Also, we now began to see that success to the German command was an object demanding no attention to cost if by any possibility a vital mission could be carried out which must result in a greater cost to the enemy. Under the circumstances of the Norwegian campaign, success must be costly; the cost would not be harder to meet if accepted without reference to time. Time had to be enslaved; free, it was a friend of the democracies.

Hence, great troop-carrying planes swept down on to the Oslo aerodrome with the shortest possible interval between landings, and sometimes without apparent reference to wind. One out of every four is said to have crashed; but the very natural regret felt by the German command could barely

## FRONT TO BACK

modify their satisfaction in receiving seventy-five per cent of their effectives. Ships were mined, torpedoed and bombed in the Kattegat and Skager Rak; but many reached Oslo. Although those waters were filled with thousands of drowned Germans, ghoulishly bumping against our submarines on the surface or submerged; the lines of communication were thinned at times, but never broken for long. The Germans quickly established an effective fighting force in Norway.

We could be shocked and amazed at this awful carnage as carefully and quietly our plans were laid to combat German intentions in Norway; but when the full story is told it may prove that German efficiency and rapid military thinking was much more merciful than our prehistorical planning.

Of course, Hitler has sacrificed much of his navy; but he doubtless believes the sacrifice justified. Perhaps he had no choice between the Norwegian sea bed and Scapa Flow. In Norwegian waters his ships could, and did, serve his turn. Nevertheless, he used up some of his capital, never a really safe thing to do.

It has often been urged that we British in Britain were hopelessly complacent until the Norwegian campaign developed unfavourably. With so many witnesses against me, I should have difficulty in contending that the British people have not been complacent since 1938. From then they have been deeply anxious and eager to do everything possible for their country. And this anxiety deepened throughout the winter of 1939-40. The deep basic fact of democratic government could make for enthusiasm, even initiative; but not for the rapid formulation of an efficient plan unless chance, or good luck, made our choice of leaders in a crisis exceptional.

The fact that we ordinary British people have never had the faintest doubt regarding the final outcome of the war has

perhaps been mistaken for complacency, as our resistance to the thought of our local brand of defeatist, poltroon and pessimist has laid us open to the charge of unthinking optimism. We are well aware that we can, and do, appoint fumbling leaders; but we know that we can compete with them, and throw them into the wilderness, or the House of Lords, and appoint others.

As far as the Norwegian campaign is concerned the first jolt, not deeply unexpected, came when an American newspaper correspondent cabled to his highly reputable paper from the Norwegian-Swedish border a story about the fighting near Stenkier.

This story offered a rather sentimental, if distressing, picture of two British battalions, one territorial and another of the newer regular army, not well-trained and poorly equipped, being forced to meet highly trained German veterans of the Polish campaign, magnificently supported by dive-bombers and defended by mechanized units, against whom the British soldiers had no chance whatever. According to this correspondent, our men were threatened with annihilation.

The picture, designed for an American audience trained to accept great emphasis, seemed to us distinctly melodramatic, notably in the passage where the correspondent quoted a British officer apparently in a highly neurotic state pleading, 'for God's sake to send aeroplanes' to give them a chance against the Nazi dive-bombers.

We found great difficulty in accepting that poignant scene; British people may be disarmed and stripped naked, but they will face death gloriously clothed in a sense of humour; nevertheless, we accepted the American's story as a foundation of fact despite the War Office statement that he had distorted facts.

Our position in Norway was undoubtedly deteriorating,

## FRONT TO BACK

as was our faith in our leaders. Despite official explanations and the spate of information now offered us, that faith was sick unto death when, to put it bluntly, we were forced to get out from Andalsnes and Namsos.

At this time I remarked to Martha at the farm-house that, judging from the Norwegian news, we were in for a bad time.

'What!' she exclaimed — 'You don't think they're coming here?'

I did not think they were coming here, and said so; ridiculing Martha's absurd fears, but I admit that her exclamation marked for me the beginning of doubts in some British minds regarding our ability to defeat Germany.

It is now an old and weary story, that of the British withdrawal from Norway, which may be abandoned with the equally weary explanations offered by our leaders. A major defeat was thrust upon the British people because our leaders sought to qualify us for the Kingdom of Heaven by forcing us to make a noble gesture to unhappy Norway, a gesture which should never have been made since it imperilled the trust in us still remaining in the neutral kingdoms of this earth.

It was at this time that in deeply melancholy mood I kept a dinner engagement with Colonel H. Moran, the author of a most charming book which has enjoyed much less success than it deserves, *Viewless Winds*.

My host was obviously very tired, a natural enough condition I could see after he had explained that his entire day had been spent sitting on an army medical board concerned with the discharge of large numbers of recruits, chiefly from the Pioneer Corps, who had managed to hide disabilities when they enlisted. To say the least of it, the news from Norway had depressed my spirits; and with any other host, the small dinner party might have been hard to endure.

Colonel Moran remarked that quite large numbers of ex-

service men from the last war had boldly lied about their age and stolen into the Pioneer Corps where they worked better than men thirty years their junior. They had hopes, he said, of being asked to do something more stimulating than navvy's work.

At this point I said, perhaps a shade bitterly, 'They are of the generation who could defend and save the Empire in 1914;' adding — 'What do you think of this withdrawal from Norway?'

Colonel Moran remarked casually, even unconcernedly, that he had not seen the papers. He had been very busy all day, and had hurried back to the hotel to be in time for dinner. I therefore gave him the news.

'I am only wondering,' he said, 'if the blow will be heavy enough. The British are only at their best when everything is going really wrong.'

I could have remarked that I had heard someone mention somewhere, at some time, that the British always muddle through, and win only the last battle; but the very kindly eye of a man of deep human sympathy and understanding forbade even the politest attempt at satire.

'I know,' he admitted, 'that that has been said before, that there is danger in it; but British tenacity is an amazing fact, and quite inexplicable to a medical man like myself who deplores the conditions under which so many of them are forced to live.'

He went on to tell me that when he returned to England a year or two ago after a long absence in Australia, he was distressed to note what he thought was a definite deterioration in British national character. There seemed a weakening in the moral fibre of the country.

'My estimate was five years longer as a Great Power,' he said. 'This war, awful as it is, is plainly saving the Empire.'

'Of course,' he added, 'I love England. Who wouldn't,

## FRONT TO BACK

who really knows England; but something had to happen to save her. If this blow is sufficiently heavy, there will be an even greater awakening. Tenacity—tenacity is a great British quality—will begin to play its part, and the British will remain absurdly deaf even when their friends begin to count them out.'

'You mean the Americans,' I suggested; 'they're beginning to do that now.'

I know there is nothing fresh in what Colonel Moran had to say that evening in Kensington; even the Germans have written of us in similar strain; but the effect on me was wholly reassuring. The case was bad perhaps, and the patient was for it; but when the malady had taken its normal course, there would be the steep climb back through convalescence to better health. A mortal disease sometimes offered few alarming signs before the end.

It is difficult to imagine a British disaster unrelieved by humour; and while the Norwegian campaign was fought in an ice-like atmosphere, considerable warmth was lent to it by the (obviously) Scottish soldier the B.B.C. recruited to give his impressions.

He had evidently been carefully rehearsed with his pronunciation of place names, and with slow Scots determination he got them right, or we presumed he did. There was no wild leaping over 'Andalsnes', 'Dombaas', nor 'Namsos'; they were all, and every time, honoured with a deliberate pause before being taken with superb deliberation. 'Stenkier', unhappily, was not mentioned. Incidentally, we owe Hitler a grudge for making us move so quickly, giving our men no time to invent their own pronunciations of foreign place names. Norway offered the widest possibilities.

This Scot, who has remained anonymous, was evidently a veteran of the last war and apparently an engineer whose work, had the 'Jerrumuns' given him time, was the demoli-

tion of roads and bridges. In the confusion of the ill-starred rapid advance and equally rapid retreat, he had found himself with odd fighting units, and had fought with some relish.

Although, in fact, he was telling of a retreat, the fight was the thing for him and he gave us the impression that he and his comrades, some of them young and inexperienced, but soon fighting like old hands, had easily mastered these 'Jerrumuns'. He made it quite clear that they were no match for the British, and we who listened gained the impression that in the mixture of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish which makes the British, the proportion of Scottish was quite high.

'These Jerrumans,' he said, 'are not like the auld Jerrumuns; they're durity fighters — durity fighters. There they were, a strong force against just a few of us. They could have taken us easily; but they wouldn'a come on. They must wait for their — tanks.'

There was a world of contempt in his emphasis on the word 'tanks'.

Reports from American papers given some prominence in ours spoke with the deepest sympathy of our set-back; but they often struck an alarming note which depressed some of us. Highly reputable American papers now began to suggest that it was by no means certain that we should eventually win the war. Obviously, they based their impressions on hard facts; and yet we felt they should be aware that there is only one fact which may presage our defeat — the slaughter of all of us.

However, the situation was plainly serious enough to force us to dig up the more suitable remarks made by Napoleon now, for the first time, and with little respect for the memory of the French hero, regarded as Hitler's predecessor in the aggression racket. Again and again we comforted each

## FRONT TO BACK

other by taking turns (it seemed) in saying, 'Well, it will be all right — in the end. As Napoleon said, "The British only win one battle — the last!"'

Other pertinent sayings were boldly dragged from Shakespeare and the works of the ancients; nor was Holy Writ spared. Only very old-fashioned people, out of touch with current thought, said, 'Oh, we shall muddle through; we always do'.

I flatter myself that I am moderately in touch with modern thought; but evidence is not lacking about muddle, and the getting through is for me a foregone conclusion. In the end, shocking as it may seem, the old-fashioned people will prove to have been right. Wave your arms around like a windmill, lift yourself up by the hair like Pip's tutor in *Great Expectations*, curse and denounce; but you will not prevent muddle in a democracy. Perhaps societies of free men and women have depths of strength not vitally affected by the uneven furrows above them.

As a matter of fact, I incline to the belief that our traditional muddling (through) has the quality of a façade hiding a hard core of power and efficiency. Our enemies have never been in more danger from us than when they have swept through and smashed that façade with its draping of cobwebs and mantle of dust.

## CHAPTER II

MR. CHAMBERLAIN won the devotion and admiration of many of us in September 1938; and he strengthened both in his handling of the difficult situation faced in August and early September 1939. Had he been blessed with divine prescience, he would doubtless have taken steps immediately after the declaration of war to establish a government of all parties in the House even if that had meant his own abandonment of the seals of office. Such a government would doubtless have worked beautifully; but will anyone dare to say that the Norwegian defeat would have been avoided in consequence?

Mr. Chamberlain is an Englishman who shares to the full British tenacity. Convinced that Parliament and the British people were behind him, he had no choice but to carry on, to do his best, and to shoulder all responsibility. He would be the last to deny that he must shoulder responsibility for the Norwegian failure. He can also accept responsibility for the undoubted fact that with the help of France the nation he led had actually trapped the enemy who could only escape by breaking every law of God and man.

I wonder if it has occurred to many people, evidently not to Hitler, that Germany would have an excellent chance of winning this war if she rigidly obeyed all international law. And if she failed to win, her defeat would not be hard to bear.

Despite all that has happened, many of us continue to regard Mr. Chamberlain as a very fine Englishman and a great Prime Minister, although I admit that when I express this creed to more than one well-loved friend, it is received with something between disgust and contempt.

And there are, of course, some highly intelligent and

## FRONT TO BACK

amiable enough people who, judging from the way they have talked and written, would chase Mr. Chamberlain through Hell. And some of his detractors are infinitely less kind when they openly thank him for what they call cleverly postponing the outbreak of war with the hidden motive of winning a year's grace. More than once I have heard people say, 'The navy, army and air force leaders got hold of the old man before he left for Germany and said, "Look here — for God's sake get the business put off for at least a year to give us a bit more time. Hitler's on the war path; you can't stop him, but you can delay him".'

Of course it is true that the year's delay was of infinite benefit to us; but Mr. Chamberlain's sole object at Munich, I believe, was to demonstrate his country's abhorrence of war, and to take every possible step to avoid it.

He was not controlled by fear of war; and the only advantage he saw in postponement was the chance of complete avoidance.

Our Prime Minister nailed the tricolour of righteousness, mercy and wisdom above the Union Jack, and whatever faults of judgment he may have shown to contemporary eyes, occasionally proved blind by History, and despite the many shortcomings we dare not deny in the nation sheltering beneath the tricolour, that flag gave, and gives, us strength to pass through many struggles to the goal we seek.

However, even those of us who could not abandon the loyalty inspired in our hearts and minds by Mr. Chamberlain, had to admit after the Norwegian debate in the House that his work as Prime Minister had ended. A government representing all parties in the House was a vital necessity; the leaders of the Labour Party, doubtless with the best of reasons best known to themselves, refused to serve under him, and someone had to be found whom they would follow. Mr. Churchill was the obvious choice.

There is an impression that these Socialist leaders expect to lead our country to better things when better days dawn; it is more than likely they will be given an opportunity; but I, for one, am convinced that a likelihood, even a probability would assume the strength of a certainty if it were a fact that in September 1939 they had gladly offered full co-operation to Mr. Chamberlain. They must have known that his Cabinet lacked the strength they could supply. Were considerations of pride, politics, or personalities of any importance in view of the country's deep need?

The country's need was infinitely greater then than after the Norwegian campaign; and I incline to the view that despite the braking of speed by red tape and antique modes of procedure, good foundations were laid. The harvest is now; the sowing could not have been yesterday.

It would be idle to deny that the Socialist leaders are giving their country magnificent service; but anyone who knows anything about mass production is aware that the period of preparing is not a matter of weeks, or even months.

The Norwegian adventure had deeply stirred the country; and it was interesting to watch the effect.

Old opponents of Mr. Chamberlain and 'appeasement' were now in full cry after the Prime Minister, leading a spear-head of attack, they believed, which must force his collapse. But the general feeling in the country was much less belligerent. Ordinary people felt bound to admit the urgent need of a change; events had clearly pointed to this need; but there seemed no point in harrying a leader who had obviously done his very best. His colleagues, notably Sir Samuel Hoare and Mr. Oliver Stanley, passed through the acid test of that debate with pathetically little success.

One foreign comment was, 'It is democracy; it is magnificent; but is it war?'

## FRONT TO BACK

I admit that it is wholly admirable that a democracy may stage a debate of this kind in the face of a deadly enemy; but there were incidents in the debate which struck me as being far from magnificent.

The village inn comment was, 'Those old boys don't half tear at each other!' I expect they were referring to the Lloyd Georgian advice to the Prime Minister to practise himself the self-sacrifice he was urging on the country by sacrificing the seals of office.

I think Mr. Churchill turned many of his admirers into friends when he so doughtily defended his leader. Some of us who have always been deeply impressed by his great literary talent, and all that is so picturesque and exciting in his personality without, however, giving him complete confidence — suspecting a careerist, a man of ambition, even an opportunist — had feared when Mr. Chamberlain invited him to join the Government that the recruit might soon want to replace the commander. It had often been said, 'Winston is all right at the Admiralty; but we can't have him as Prime Minister'. It has got to be admitted that for many, many years there has been a steady resistance in this country to Mr. Churchill assuming supreme power.

Now it can be said with complete sincerity that all the British people who count are glad to have him as Prime Minister; and, as I would like to insist, amongst these are many whose admiration for Mr. Chamberlain has not been affected by the change.

I heard one man say, with truth, I think: 'It is not a change of government the country needed so much as a damn good fright!'

The Norwegian campaign supplied the fright.

Mr. Chamberlain had invariably reached my mind and heart when he spoke to us over the radio; but I shall always remember his very touching words when he told us that he

was no longer our leader. 'Mr. Churchill has asked me,' he said, 'to join his cabinet: and, of course, I have accepted.'

In the words 'and, of course, I have accepted' there was a deep generosity which appealed to me. I knew then that if by sweeping out Whitehall Mr. Chamberlain could serve his country, he would have instantly called for a broom.

As far as I have been able to judge, Mr. Chamberlain has always enjoyed the respect and liking of the mass of the British people as opposed to some of the intelligentsia, a good number of the well-to-do, middle-class, professional people, and even a number of Tories.

One evening in January, I dined with a friend, a noted musician, of great tact and charm. Of the other six guests at the Athenaeum, five were elderly men who, before their retirement, had held important posts in the colonies. Charming old gentlemen, their idea was to enjoy the excellent dinner chosen by our host, to be pleased and tactful with their company and to appreciate the excellent wines which accompanied each course.

I saw that the conversation was bound to be conventional, and might be a shade dull, until the sixth guest arrived a little late.

He was a very big youngish man in the uniform of a second lieutenant in the Territorials; and it was plain at once that my brother guests regarded him with some deference. When introduced, he handed me what seemed a small cluster of rather ripe bananas; and having gathered himself together for the banquet, proceeded to eat and talk with an awful indifference which, together with his soft kind of handshake, won my dislike.

He began attacking Mr. Chamberlain and his Government with great asperity, and during this attack, I gathered that he himself was preparing for, or had begun, a political career. He considered the Chamberlain Government as

## FRONT TO BACK

wholly inadequate as he deplored the complacency in the country which he thought highly dangerous; and he seemed to blame the Prime Minister for what he believed to be a lack of enthusiasm for the war shown by the young men of the country. At one point he asked oracularly, 'Where are the Rupert Brookes of this war?'

Much, I fear, to the discomfit of my very lovable host, I found myself being extremely rude to the big young man, easily knocking down what I regarded as his premiseless inferences, and receiving in reply a cold smile as of a mullet breaking into mirth on a fishmonger's marble slab.

I assured him that my impression, a well-founded impression, was that the young men of Britain were as willing and eager to fight for their country as their fathers were in 1914. Without exception, I told him, all my young men friends, and I have a great many, were in uniform and extremely keen about their work.

As far as Rupert Brooke was concerned, it seemed to me that although he was, unhappily, dead, the spirit to which he had given 'a local habitation and a name' was very much alive in Britain. It was absurd to seek a parallel. The last war came as something new, something even romantic and glamorous; this war was old, was stale before it began and bleached of romance in the stench of petrol. It was a job of work which had to be done, not a crusade.

The effect on the big young man was like diving into a lake of rubber. He insisted that he should know a good deal about the young men of Great Britain because he was an Oxford don. I thought this a poor reason, and said so. An Oxford don might, conceivably, know something about Oxford young men; but young Oxford men were not typical of Great Britain. In any case, I thought he was being unkind to Oxford, in view of so much, to single out that worthy institution for further attack.

As a matter of fact, his remarks about the young men of the country had not really disturbed me; it was the bitter attack launched against Mr. Chamberlain, and the cynical, sneering way in which it was delivered which roused my fury.

A fervent Chamberlain disciple, chiefly through my detestation of war, I defended my hero with all the eloquence I could muster against the big young man's charges of dilatoriness, old-fashioned methods and failure to appreciate the seriousness of the situation; ending with the assurance that I was certain I was in agreement with the mass of the ordinary people of Great Britain.

The big young man gazed at me with kindly eyes, showing that deep affection with which a scientist regards a new microbe he has isolated.

'You interest me,' he said; 'what you say lets me see that you are thinking precisely as the Government wish you to think.'

To-day, without yet learning to regard the big young man in an amiable light, I look back on that dinner at the Athenaeum with serious misgivings as I recall my dogmatic defence of a government of which my heart had approved, not so much at the expense of my mind as without proper evidence to judge.

Nevertheless, Mr. Chamberlain will always have a warm place in my heart. I cannot readily abandon a loyalty even with reason; Mr. Chamberlain's nobility of character, as I see it, his self-effacement and his devotion to the British people still offer good reasons for a continued loyalty.

The village inn's reaction—'Well, I s'pose he's got to go; but I hope he takes Sam Hoare with him!' is, perhaps, revealing.

Some weeks earlier, I had spent a week-end with Nora Waln (the author of the charming *House of Exile* and the deeply interesting *Reaching for the Stars*) and her husband at

#### FRONT TO BACK

their country house not far from my farm-house. I do not know whether she tries to do it; but I know that her more vital thoughts are expressed in the gentlest words which unaccountably dissolve the most stubborn cranium and are, equally unaccountably, accepted. She, aware of my deep appreciation of Mr. Chamberlain, remarked, 'You have old men in power in England, you know, contending with young men in Germany; maybe you will think it necessary to change this. . . .'

### CHAPTER III

ALONG our street in Bloomsbury every morning at about eleven-thirty, there hurries a newspaper seller, a picturesque looking individual, a dark-haired man of early middle age who offers a morning edition of an important evening newspaper. His eager salesmanship seems to give him a measure of unpopularity out of all proportion to his harmlessness and lack of importance. The man actually means very well indeed.

His habit of mysteriously confiding the main tit-bit of news as he takes money or gives change is chiefly maddening because, while given with a deeply confidential air, as of confiding a tip for the Derby, it is invariably distorted and inaccurate. 'A big ship sunk, sir!' he has been known to whisper; but whether the unfortunate vessel is of allied or enemy nationality remains unknown to him.

I had missed the radio news on the morning of Friday, May 10th; but aware that big and awful events had occurred on the Dutch, Belgian and Luxemburg frontiers, I awaited the shouts of the newspaper seller with impatience.

He came rather earlier than usual shouting: "'Itler's caught the bus — paper! 'Itler's caught the bus!'

I knew that the newsman had merely stumbled on a selling catch-phrase; but the fact of what has seemed his utter detachment from the war apart from its harvest of extra pennies during crises, gave his gaily uttered cry an awful significance.

'Itler's caught the bus — paper!'

The news was extremely confusing; many of the reports were incredible. However, it seemed clear that the Nazis were determined to show their hand; and this brought a measure of relief to most of us. A war which refused to begin, we felt, forgetting as usual the grim battle which the

## FRONT TO BACK

navy had been waging from the moment of its outbreak, would never end. The issue was now joined. Hitler evidently had to win or lose before summer should end; and while we foresaw a terrible struggle during the coming months, there was not the slightest doubt in our minds regarding the ultimate result. Many of us even dared to hope that the war would be over by Christmas.

As the day passed with its harvest of newspaper editions and B.B.C. news bulletins, it became increasingly difficult to accept what we read and heard.

The quick over-running of Luxemburg could be understood; the duchy is small and without adequate means of defence; but the rapidly developing situation in Holland appeared more like a nightmare than an invasion.

An enemy invading Holland should, after his ultimatum has expired, cross the frontier and, after overpowering frontier guards, proceed to contend with inundations wherein he should lose many men and much material. Heroically, and with many a cunning device in the way of amphibian tanks, large and small, he should eventually find himself up against the small, but highly efficient, Dutch army. Only after this army had been soundly defeated, should he dream of advancing towards the country's capital for the final capitulation of the nation. The campaign should occupy weeks, even months; a year might not be too long. And, of course, time should be given to Holland's allies to come to her aid.

According to the news we read and heard, Holland had become like a small sponge upon which a large cup of water had been carefully spilt. Perhaps she seemed more like a quiet barnyard hen upon which a hawk had leapt — totally.

It is true that more than one news item strove hard to keep the invasion of Holland within conventional bounds by insisting that German troops were being held at the

frontiers; but this valiant effort was cancelled out when more glaring headlines spoke of battles raging at Rotterdam, at Amsterdam and even near, if not at, The Hague. I was driven back to the atlas, and reached the general conclusion that Hitler, having defeated time in Norway, was proceeding to outwit geography in Holland.

Holland and Belgium had both appealed to the Allies, and in that jumble of uncertainties, largely disastrous, the conventional language they used in chorus with us — to fight the common enemy until victory should be won, and not to make a separate peace — struck a weirdly old-fashioned note, like women playing tennis in late-Victorian skirts.

Equally old-fashioned seemed the denunciations of Germany's cowardly action thundered from all men of good intent from many parts of the world. It seemed a waste of breath.

It is difficult to record impressions of our feelings in Great Britain during these days. Event followed event with so much rapidity that we were unable to appreciate one before another more startling had occurred.

We were literally shocked into a condition approaching insensibility.

Occasionally during the days following the German invasion of the Low Countries we enjoyed full consciousness, notably when the Dutch Crown Princess came to England with her husband and children. That looked ominous. Neither the Princess nor her mother are of the kind who retreat until it becomes vitally necessary. The newspapers pointed out that Prince Bernhard would at once return to his duties in Holland; but there was no word of his departure, and not long after this the Queen of Holland came to London.

There was much news these days about the German use of parachutists. Vast numbers, it was said, descended in

## FRONT TO BACK

British and Dutch uniforms. Others seem to have chosen the garb of clergymen or even women. Belgium, it was said, had enjoyed the descent of priests and nuns — a delicate attention since Belgium is largely Roman Catholic.

Parachutists have caused something approaching panic in the minds of even highly responsible people, it would seem, judging by the exquisite precautions taken to meet them. Of course every precaution should be taken; but I find some difficulty in accepting many of the parachute stories.

Men who fought in Belgium have assured me that the German parachutists are actually criminals who have been thrust suitably armed into an aeroplane and eventually spilt out through a trap door to do their worst. One friend told me that he actually saw a German descend clad in a British naval jacket and French army breeches.

I have tried to work out how a nun could descend, but without success. Her voluminous skirts would undoubtedly cause trouble, unless German efficiency basted in thirty or forty pounds of lead and risked seriously affecting her mobility upon landing.

Despite all the stories, I incline to the belief that the parachute corps of the German army, pests as they are from our point of view, are actually, as the Germans have said, of their *élite* in courage and initiative. I can only imagine them to be magnificently trained men because otherwise their use would be highly expensive and, apart from doubtful nuisance value, not of great service to any plan. I think, too, that parachutists are generally not landed unless their reception on landing has been reasonably assured, or when the disorganization in a beaten, retreating army can be aggravated into a rout by their attention. Obviously, occasions can arise when a parachutist is asked to risk almost certain destruction in carrying out some vital mission. Too trusting

Holland seems to have been honeycombed with treachery and well prepared for the descent of parachutists.

Mr. E. N. van Kleffens, the Netherlands Foreign Minister, gives an excellent account of the malign effect of parachutists in his book, *The Rape of the Netherlands*. The fact that they were nearly all exterminated should modify my opinion; but the German plan was to subjugate Holland in one day; and if this plan had succeeded, and it had an excellent chance of success, the majority of the parachutists would have survived.

If one looks calmly at the Dutch campaign, it is not difficult to decide that Hitler's task was easy enough, given that courage and dash which, it must be admitted, he can expect from his army. After all, if you are not bound by any considerations of honour and common decency, your freedom is almost boundless; and if you are sufficiently strong, there is little you may not achieve if you decide to contend with others naive enough to believe that you are certain to behave like a gentleman.

Hitler might have been able to achieve an equally successful coup in England in 1938, or perhaps a little earlier. At this moment, he may be regretting that he wasted so much exquisitely designed treachery on a small, and relatively unimportant, country like Holland whose subjugation cannot give him that final decision which must mean all to him, including his ability to go on breathing.

We might have been honoured with a Strength-Through-Joy visit from a few thousand of his boldest fanatics. German vessels, ostensibly laden with pig-iron or mouth organs, might have brought tanks to Liverpool and other points on the English coast. They might have been received without question in the whistling years of peace before 1939. They need not have been obviously German, for it has been whispered, one hopes without foundation, that the first

## FRONT TO BACK

magnetic mines were laid in our waters by ostensibly neutral ships. Cleverly distributed submarines might have wrought havoc with our unsuspecting warships, and much could have been done with mines. The scheme would have depended largely on good timing; but German thoroughness would have seen to that. In the confusion, with the air infested with German aeroplanes, as parachutists dropped and troop carrying planes landed on undefended civil aerodromes, Britain could, conceivably, have shared the fate of Holland.

Fortunately for us, Hitler missed that particular bus.

But imagine the expression on Mr. Chamberlain's face had the German Ambassador dug him out of bed at, say, 4.30 a.m. and demanded the surrender of the British Empire; remarking, in passing, that Birmingham was already cut off.

With all these tremendous happenings in the Low Countries, it was difficult to give much concentrated attention to the valiant work of Mr. Churchill as, in the midst of the storm, he proceeded to form a government which would include the best the country could offer.

Nevertheless, we had a little time to offer Mr. Attlee full appreciation when he seemed to make it clear that he was looking forward to the brave new Britain which he and his followers would build when the war had been won. Things simply could not be the same, we gathered; and we were assured that those who hoped to see the new Britain very much like the old Britain of 1939 were nothing but Colonel Blimps dozing in their clubs.

Most of us are with him to a man (and particularly to a woman); but even as we read of the dreadful things happening in Holland and Belgium, some of the more tremulous amongst us dared to hope that in the process of curing our very obvious troubles, Mr. Attlee's medicine would not make us very ill indeed, even unto death or, worse still, unto

Fascism. We anticipate serious scratching; God forbid that we should be tickled with a circular saw.

But Mr. Attlee and his Socialist friends are doing fine work, so let them get on with it. I expect Mr. Attlee is not ignorant of British character, its well-found suspicion of hurried change; and that he is well aware that the majority of us in Britain will sympathize with his theories and splendid ideals even while we watch him like a cat watching a mouse and be ready to throw him out quite heartlessly if any of his actions risk what all of us have inherited from the centuries of slow, but sure, evolution towards better things. The evenness of our keel must not be affected. We can only assimilate just so much, and only a little more than we deserve.

I despair of politics, politicians and government as we have known them; and hope for Heaven therefore, believing that democracy is about the best we can manage on earth.

Still I have often wondered why a purely scientific form of government has not been developed long before this. I can imagine a dozen or so strictly anonymous, brilliant minds, especially trained for the work, in more or less continuous session, carrying on the business of government and forbidden to utter a political word outside their council chamber; and doing very well indeed. Eventually, they would have little need to talk even in the secrecy of their chamber because, after a time, every symptom of difficulty in the country would have its own tabulated remedy which would be applied without question, or newspaper comment. Progress would be watched and guided, and balance maintained.

The saving in hard cash would be immense; but this would be a small advantage compared with the freedom we would enjoy from politicians.

The radio, to which politicians are positively beckoned, Heaven help us! may eventually save us; but for the present

## FRONT TO BACK

it looks as if they will continue to bore us, and to torture us, for some time longer, before we desperately groan, '*Il faut en finir!*'

The horizon looked very dark indeed when the people of the Netherlands dared contend no longer with the invading German hordes. Mr. Churchill, in a truly magnificent speech in the House, gathered us together into a crusade of one purpose, the defeat of Nazi Germany. 'Come then,' he said; 'let us go forward together with our united strength!'

If one reads this speech in Hansard, it seems strikingly apropos; but one passage, quite happy in its context, 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat', intrigued the Press and was instantly pounced upon by the radio. Hence in our newspapers, all of which many of us read, and in the radio bulletins to which nearly all of us listen, that telling phrase was repeated again and again. Everybody concerned with its reporting thoroughly enjoyed it and, undoubtedly, it was collected from the ether throughout the world.

But what was the effect on us, on the mass of us in Great Britain? We saw — oh, yes, we saw — the dark clouds rising on the horizon; a storm was gathering, and there was one thing to do and almost nothing to be said — to put our head up into the wind and to receive the worst it could do with calm imperturbability. No one must suspect, least of all our enemy, that we felt the faintest suspicion of fear. We could, of course, contend with the monstrous repetition of, and cruel emphasis inflicted on, Mr. Churchill's offer of blood, toil, tears and sweat — a horrid mixture if one comes to think of it — but it actually, I think, added to the strain.

But not the least burden laid on the British people by their leaders during these critical days was the vile tendency, doubtless unconscious and with good intent — mere stupidity but nothing less dangerous — in orators and writers to

pluck flowers of rhetoric from our troubrous earth, bouquets of much beauty as such; but upon which we gazed with a deep-seated fear — a fear that those who led us might be surf crashing in fuzzy loveliness and not the deep, strong ocean across which we might pass with normal hazard.

Mr. Churchill's blood and toil remark was obviously an oratorical expression of modesty, wholly praiseworthy; its vain repetition called for a reply from the deeply perplexed British people.

And could we not have said, 'A leader of the Empire today is surely happy in that which he leads. We hold back nothing; we have held back nothing. Our blood has been shed; more is offered. Toil—all our strength is our country's. Sweat — to every hour, we offer the work of two. But tears — do British men and women weep?'

We could have pointed to our sailors, still invincible in their fine ships; still able to meet every satanic device conceived by an enemy who refuses fair combat. And were there not fine warships now building in our shipyards, exquisitely designed machines of steel whose flaring bows would soon divide the waters, now with gathering life; but soon to be given a soul and a quickly obedient personality by the men of the British navy — men of cold, calculating efficiency, yet brotherly, warm-hearted, of the sea they cleanse.

We have an air force, and need we be appalled by the word of Germans that it is outnumbered? And if outnumbered should not its quality count for much? Without the hysterical compulsion of rapid expansion for the worst of reasons, our air force could choose only the best from Great Britain and the Empire. It was growing rapidly, and already many of us could believe, despite the gloomy forebodings of some who wrote and others who talked, that our quality was more than a match for the enemy's alleged numbers. Already, the Royal Air Force, in deeds of valour which now

## FRONT TO BACK

could command tears of pride, showed the flowering of our national age.

Of our modern army, we knew little; but we could believe that the British soldier still lived and would fight well. History offered evidence which allowed us to have complete faith. It would grow, and while it grew the navy would defend our frontiers — the sea, and always the sea — while the Royal Air Force cleansed the sky.

No small offering to a leader who could lead; a boundless power which might not be thrown away.

## CHAPTER IV

THE British army, hitherto deployed along the Franco-Belgian frontier, went tearing into Belgium to meet the German invaders. We heard this as a joyous climax to the nine o'clock news as a radio observer explained the sounds of rushing vehicles and the cheerful shouts of Belgian peasants. To some of us older soldiers who knew Belgium during the last war, the scene could be easily pictured — Madame, a wee bit stout and a shade off an even keel, and Monsieur le patron with Marie Louise, Gabrielle and innumerable *petits enfants* cheering lustily and offering flowers to *les soldats Anglais*. We saw the background, odd houses and the inevitable estaminet which we know had a stove of peculiar design in the main room, and on the stove a large coffee pot — all rather quaint and interesting but not particularly clean.

On they rushed with a deafening clatter to join the fine Belgian army led by its grand young king, to let the Nazis enjoy some real resistance to their monstrous invasion.

The Belgian army was a force to be reckoned with, vastly different to the contemptible little Army which had dared to oppose the earlier eruption of German hordes. There were, too, the defences of the Albert Canal, and a magnificent line of fortifications, including our old friend Liége of the former war, stretching down past the Luxemburg frontier to France where what was soon to be called the Maginot Line proper ended near Sedan.

In discussing the developing campaign, many commentators offered useful information about the area around and

## FRONT TO BACK

north of Sedan. It included the Ardennes, so naturally strong that, we gathered, small forces could hold it easily. And any invader with his eye on France who had successfully surmounted the difficult Ardennes country would be faced by the Meuse, a river, we judged from the many journalistic pictures offered us, which passed through a veritable devil's gap of rocky gorges at this section of its bed.

At this time, some of us recalled young King Leopold's decision some years ago to reaffirm his country's neutrality, a decision which seemed chilly at the time and vaguely unfriendly to France who immediately decided to extend the Maginot Line to the coast.

Most of us had believed that this extension had become part of the Maginot Line and was as formidable an obstacle to invasion as its parent. We were therefore a little surprised when vague emphasis was laid on what was called the Maginot Line 'proper' as opposed to the 'extension'. No one, however, believed that the French High Command would be foolish enough to maintain impregnability along one half of a system of fortifications while the obvious point of attack along the other half, facing Belgium, remained vulnerable and an invitation to a turning movement.

We had anticipated certain delays at this stage of the battle about to develop; after all, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum in their classic combat had given Alice time to watch them prepare for battle. But apparently the German High Command had no intention of considering the feelings of the deeply interested audience in Great Britain and France as they proceeded to fight the battle and to end it with incredible celerity.

The British and French forces had apparently pivoted in the Sedan area, sweeping like the spoke of a wheel to support the Belgian and what was left of the Dutch defence.

They seemed to be doing very well, and it looked for a moment, but hardly more than a moment, that much of Belgium including Brussels would be held and a strong line defended well to the east of the capital. Brussels had been bombed, and parachutists were apparently dropping like rain on Belgium; but the parachutists were being effectively dealt with and there seemed no reason why the Germans should not be held.

Then everything became curiously vague in Belgium. Unhappy Louvain with its new library had become the centre of military operations and there reached us the same old pitiable stories of fire and destruction which had distressed us so much in 1914. But there was now no time to dwell on this second destruction of Louvain and its famous library. It had apparently been blown into smithereens by Hitler's Knights of the Air in their dive bombers, and so we allowed Louvain to pass from our minds with the passing thought that even if the thousands of invaluable books had decided to hit back at these fine young German heroes, their ability immediately to punish would be slight. The stories of unhappy nuns being driven from their convents to join the dreary procession of terrified refugees on the Belgian roads which had shocked the world in 1914, were now told again with even better evidence to support them; but these we now accepted as normal German proceedings, and not news. The defence of the railway station at Louvain and a German repulse inflicted by British soldiers seemed of more importance, especially when the report was enlivened with odd personal details.

Our eyes were focused on Belgium where the Allies, we knew, were girding their swords to drive back the invaders and to turn to little account such unimportant German successes as the crossing of strategically vital canals and rivers and the storming of powerful forts along the line of the

## FRONT TO BACK

Belgian main defences. The fact that one great fort had been rendered *hors de combat* by the simple device of dropping grenades down the vents in its cupola proved its unimportance and the really very desperate straits to which the Germans must be reduced when they could play so unexpected a trick!

We found great difficulty in dropping our eyes southward, to Sedan and the Meuse, when both began to assume importance. The situation was becoming ridiculous. According to the best known rules of battle, the Germans should have continued to fight our forces in Belgium, and not to have made concentration so difficult for home strategists by charging through the impossible Ardennes where they were least expected, and threatening the flank of our northern armies. We wanted to go on being shocked with the stories we were bound to hear of treachery in Holland and Belgium, to hear more about Liège and its brave defenders.

Then there was the young King of the Belgians, always associated in our minds with his lovely young wife who had died so tragically; already in his orders-of-the day, notably in his message to the isolated garrison at Liège, he was showing himself a chip from the old block. At least King Leopold should be given a little time to play his part.

At the very worst, if our efforts to save Belgium failed, our armies would pivot in retreat back to the Maginot Line extension to prepare for that spring at the Germans we would undoubtedly make when the time was ripe.

But now we were forced to look closely at Sedan which had assumed alarming importance even before a full dress battle had been fought in Belgium, still the scene largely of strategic withdrawals, but not, we noted, a rapid withdrawal to the Maginot Line extension. This seemed all wrong; but we comforted ourselves with the thought that our leaders

knew what they were doing, and hoped for a decisive victory at any time now.

The first hint of danger came in a simple communiqué which mentioned that the French had evacuated the town of Sedan. There was nothing alarming in the communiqué; and beyond the thought that a slight reverse at this point, in view of its tragic history for France, might distress our French ally, we might have dismissed the incident if it had not been stated authoritatively in Paris that Sedan was *not* part of the Maginot Line.

This denial seemed to inspire arguments, driving many to the map to investigate Sedan's geographical reference to the Meuse. Many people were now plunged into alarming uncertainty about the Maginot Line extension, some shouting that Sedan was actually part of it, while others, quoting the authoritative French statement, said it was not. Eventually, we saw that the French 'spokesman', one of those mysterious, anonymous individuals who crop up in the capitals of belligerent countries during crises, whom I always imagine to be coming down marble stairs in a great hurry, had meant that Sedan was not part of the Maginot Line proper.

Apparently the Germans had crossed the Meuse without serious difficulty and were, we were urged to believe, in grave danger of being drowned in their thousands when the French developed, as develop they certainly would, a crushing counter-attack.

But the Germans decided not to be drowned. They broke through the French defences near Mézières and made the famous bulge which, according to reports reaching London, would soon be squeezed dry of Nazis when the French reserves came up.

Apparently the French reserves found great difficulty in coming up because of the tedious habit now formed by the

## FRONT TO BACK

German tanks of running about French territory at will. No one seemed to know what was happening except the Germans who now issued extremely definite communiqués in contrast to the bland reports offered from Paris. Even if we distrusted the former and tried to accept the latter, the map persisted in showing enough truth to cause grave misgivings in London, notably when pins were thrust into the names of towns and villages captured by the Germans and a rubber band placed around the pins.

Nevertheless, French military spokesmen continued to comment comfortingly each day. I really do not know how we would have survived these anxious days without the French military spokesmen. Here and there, we were assured, the enemy was being firmly held, although at such-and-such an area, the position remained confusing, and liquid — a useful word, 'liquid', since it suggested a picture as of an overflowing and an uncontrollable running about, of Nazi tanks led by motor cyclists. Not that we appreciated the awful implications in this liquid situation, even when we began to see a dim picture of the French army as a first rate ship, with highly efficient engines, charming accommodation and spacious promenade decks; in fact, with everything a good ship should have, and only prevented from rushing across the ocean at impressive speed by a large and awkward rent in her keel.

Mr. Churchill flew to France, evidently to see for himself, if he could. Our Prime Minister knows a great deal more of warfare than David Copperfield's Dora's Aunt Lavinia Spenlow knew of love despite her contacts with Mr. Pidger, for Mr. Churchill is an experienced soldier himself as well as a deep student of the great soldiers of the past of whom he has written with superb skill; but judging from his speech when he returned, it seemed obvious to me that the situation in France had defeated even his well-trained powers of obser-

vation. It is doubtful if even M. Reynaud, with whom Mr. Churchill discussed the situation, saw more clearly.

With his natural facility of expression, Mr. Churchill drew a picture of the Battle of the Bulge; and while his words breathed confidence that the French armies would recover from their shock and re-establish a co-ordinated defence, it seemed clear that he shared our perplexity when he said, 'It would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage, or to suppose that well-trained, well-equipped armies numbering three or four millions of men can be overcome in the space of a few weeks, or even months, by a scoop, or raid, of mechanized vehicles however formidable'.

Uncle Pinchin at the village inn failed to share Mr. Churchill's confidence at this time. Uncle, who talks a great deal at great speed through his moustache without conventional sentence divisions, and consequently without stops, except when he takes a rapid pull at his half pint of ale often in the middle of a thought, is not often listened to for long because his friends, and he has many devoted friends, can seldom catch more than a suspicion of what he feels overwhelmingly bound to impart. He is a character, and a lovable one to whom we are all devoted, even when the news of exciting events has made him more inarticulate than usual, but never quiet. I found him one evening at this time with his handsome figure draped over a settle in the tap room muttering again and again without now concerning himself with an audience, 'Jerry will get the whole of France, Jerry will'.

Upon this occasion, even those people in the less cosy saloon bar were sufficiently interested in Uncle's prophecy to dispute it, even to laugh at it; but this made no difference to him. He merely went on repeating, 'Jerry will get the whole of France, Jerry will' and laughed happily enough with those who thought so monstrous a notion only worthy of contemptuous amusement.

## FRONT TO BACK

To a few of my more particular friends at the inn, men who have been kind enough to express interest in what I had to say about the war situation, I hinted that we must be prepared to contemplate the defeat of the French armies, even the loss of France as an ally, in France. I did not think this probable; merely possible enough to force us to prepare to accept the worst.

When General Gamelin had been abruptly dismissed so that 'subsequent proceedings interested him no more' and General Weygand had replaced him, our radio announcer gave the latter's age, seventy-three, in a quick little sentence which we might have ignored if he had not so suspiciously hurried on to outline the new general's famous exploits, notably at Warsaw, and to tell us of his association with the great French generals of the last war. It seemed that seventy-three was quite an ordinary kind of age at which an army commander might instantly extricate an immense force from the overwhelming muddle of defeat at a vital point, and not a bit too old to organize further resistance to the assaults of a victory-flushed army.

One of the men at the office remarked after the announcement of General Weygand's appointment, 'We're having a good crop of old boys this season, what!' and aptly expressed the prevailing impression.

It seemed fortunate just then that Napoleon was no Rip van Winkle; otherwise an attempt might have been made to repel the Nazis with breech-loaders.

M. Reynaud had had a good press, and being a mere boy in his sixties, the fact that much of his fame had to be dug up with dead men did not place him in the dugout class. He was often proclaimed as almost a reincarnation of Tiger Clemenceau.

But I could not see even the shadow of a Clemenceau talking as Reynaud spoke to the French Senate on May 21st.

'The Germans have entered Amiens and Arras,' he said with dramatic effect. 'France is in danger!' he added; 'France cannot die. As for me, if I were told to-morrow that only a miracle could save France I should reply, I believe in miracles, because I believe in France.'

A little later, in a broadcast, Mr. Duff Cooper tried to show the danger in rumour by admitting that soon after M. Reynaud's speech, a newspaper correspondent had told him that the French Prime Minister had said that only a miracle could save France. But much as we enjoy Mr. Duff Cooper's beautifully delivered broadcasts, few of us could accept the incident as a really good lesson. Mr. Duff Cooper detected a vital distinction. Strange! We ordinary people sensed no vital difference. As usual, we were right, much to our alarm.

As an orator with so vast an audience, Reynaud made the fatal, and stupid, mistake of putting ideas into people's heads. The only time a national leader may dare mention, or suggest, defeat is when all danger of catastrophe has passed; otherwise it should be inarticulate with the death rattles of himself and his people. I think it absurd to believe that any nation, no matter how courageous or tenacious in character, can accept guiding words which do not point clearly and definitely to victory.

You may tell one man the consequences of defeat and inspire him to win victories; but a wise leader will know enough about crowd psychology to see danger in, and the hazard of inspiring gathering weakness if he dares even to hint the suggestion — *if* we should not win.

Reynaud's admission that, by incredible blunders, certain bridges crossing the Meuse had not been demolished showed a poor grip of an incredibly difficult situation; and there was no comfort in the thought that the guilty, or careless, officers concerned would probably be shot at dawn.

## FRONT TO BACK

At the time when the elastic band around the pins on our war map was stretching from a bulge into an ominous tentacle so that the elastic threatened to snap, I dined with an officer of high rank, a friend who had hitherto remained most cautious and reserved. He said, holding up his right hand, 'I would give this if I knew our men were back in England'.

## CHAPTER V

IT was fortunate for the rubber band surrounding the pins on our war map of France and the Low Countries that, after reaching Abbeville, the Germans could advance no further in a westerly direction without swimming. Otherwise, it must have snapped. As it was, it had proved itself an unusually excellent rubber band in its ability to contain that long German corridor from the Sedan region to the coast. Although drawn into an alarming glass-like transparency, it still held. When first placed around the Mézières area, it had assumed the form of an honest English apple-tart, without the slightest sign of any hidden desire to become an obnoxious German sausage.

The rapid formation of that German sausage, or long tongue, although tentacle offers a better image, was almost impossible to accept in Britain. Our minds were drawn into transparency, like the rubber band, when rumours began to reach us of not very large numbers of German motor cycles followed by light tanks charging to the coast, only pausing at convenient petrol stations where they were served freely by the terrified station owners. There was an element of the ridiculous in this 'liquid' situation.

However, it had to be admitted that the Germans had achieved with ease in a few days what a great army, sacrificing immense numbers of men and expending incalculable material, might have taken many months to accomplish.

Heartening enough bulletins continued to come from the British Expeditionary Force, fighting bravely in a well-ordered withdrawal; and when both British and French armies announced that for the present they would not release information, we found hope in the thought that a brilliant

## FRONT TO BACK

scheme had been evolved by General Weygand which might bring disaster on an enemy who had outraged so many well-tried rules of warfare.

That counter-attack! Oh, that great counter-attack for which we hoped so eagerly at this time even while one alarming and irrefutable fact stared us in the face — that the main lines of communication of the British Expeditionary Force had been cut when the enemy reached Abbeville! Those of us who knew how vast, and how complicated, an organization is necessary to maintain supplies even for an army as small as ours were aware that bases hastily arranged, at the more northerly channel ports, would not be effective for long in the teeth of attack from enemy bombers. A denouement was inevitable if the long corridor held by the Germans was not wiped out.

Reports I heard from friends who had returned to England from Boulogne and Calais were startling. The air above both towns was infested with bombers and even the roads, so they said, and this seems incredible, were not safe from roving German tanks.

But the counter-attack! The counter-attack would instantly relieve this ridiculous situation. One military commentator remarked at this time that Weygand would not spare his armies in the carrying out of a design; they would simply have to face up to the worst the enemy could do until that precise moment arrived when he would strike, and strike hard.

But if Weygand did not strike, and strike very soon, the B.E.F., for the most part a magnificent body of men and, despite rumours to the contrary, effectively equipped, must become a thing of reflexes and as capable of carrying out a centrally ordered plan as the sawn-off leg of a lobster.

And soon the German tentacle began inclining to the north-eastward, sweeping along the coast, swiftly and

unerringly cutting and threatening our new lines of communication already harassed by dive bombers and wandering German tanks.

At lunch with a senior staff officer from the War Office at this time, I remarked: 'This long German force creating so much difficulty and havoc; it's all flank; why is it not cut?'

The general glanced at me with a quizzical smile, and shrugged his shoulders. 'Search me!' he said, 'I don't know — it looks like jam from home, but...'

For a little longer our eyes remained fixed on 'The Gap' between Arras and Cambrai; but our hearts were with our own men in their increasingly desperate situation. There they were in Belgium fighting as only so magnificent an army could fight, but soon their training, their equipment and good courage would be of no use to them whatever. Many people believed the British Expeditionary Force was doomed.

It was our army; it was the proud spearhead of our military effort, the nucleus from which would grow the mighty continental army able to deal with Hitler. Small in numbers now, its future held boundless possibilities. If that gap were not closed, it could have no future.

And yet I never believed either annihilation or abject surrender would be its fate; I felt certain a way of escape would be found. And if the worst had happened, I would not have abandoned this earlier confidence as futile. The speed of the German advance was bound to be accompanied by some disorganization, and the enemy's apparent dependence on luck, or good fortune, might leave a loophole. The sea was at our rear with the British Navy waiting.

We were on particular terms of intimacy with this our army through the wireless which magically on Saturday nights had sometimes permitted us to share with mothers

## FRONT TO BACK

at home the emotion of talking with their sons and husbands in dugouts and billets in France. These little talks were all sincerity; through the (sometimes) rather schoolgirl-nicely-repeating-her-lesson diction, we could picture the anxious mother and share her anxiety. Occasionally, men spoke from the dugouts, exposing what in the workaday life of the entrenchments they doubtless carefully hid, a comradely affection for their mates, even for the sergeant. Once a senior officer spoke and seemed suitably embarrassed.

Then there had been broadcasts from radio observers, all giving lively pictures of courage and efficiency with a cheerful contempt for the enemy.

And the newspapers had told us much, always maintaining that impression of clean, bold manliness, and the same confidence. One American correspondent quoted in our papers had cabled to his country that he had seen men of the first contingents of the British Army; a company of Tommies 'as indignant as Mr. Chamberlain', he said, and thereby achieved, I thought, a masterpiece of expression, conveying in few words with humorous appreciation the impression of a grim purpose.

And our army was magnificently equipped. Throughout the years, the Press had given us stories of its gradual mechanization, driving us to sympathize deeply with the cavalrymen and artillerymen forced to part with their horses. But the horse had to be replaced by the machine; and because we are a rich country, we knew that only the best machines would be offered our army.

Then there was Lord Gort in command, the V.C. whom, with an applauding Press, Mr. Hore-Belisha had promoted over the heads of older men. His pictures showed a solid enough Briton, and evidently one who would not be easily hustled into precipitate action judging by one picture we saw of him chatting with Mr. Chamber-

lain in St. James's Park a day or two after war was declared. A calm, comfortable kind of man he looked, smoking a pipe in uniform if I remember rightly, and evidently not one with much respect for 'spit and rub' judging from his kit, which seemed tidy enough, but not nearly smart enough for the soldiering days I had known. But these were changed days and, judging from the popular Press, the army of a democracy must have the love and friendliness of the family intermingling in its ranks, a worthy enough conception until one recalls that a family is concerned with birth and an army with death. The picture of Lord Gort in St. James's Park was more comforting than otherwise. He was evidently superbly confident in the face of the awful danger threatening the Poles.

The Press did its best to popularize Lord Gort as 'Tiger Gort', but the name did not stick with many of us who were, nevertheless, willing to allow a good foundation for future deeds of valour in the Commander-in-Chief.

But if my own admiration was naturally reserved through ignorance, Martha at the farm-house was full of devotion for Lord Gort who had been, she said, a boy at Harrow when she was a maid there. She had not 'maided' him herself, she admitted, but the maid who had 'maided' him thought very highly of a poem the future General had written and dropped in his waste-paper basket. I cannot vouch for the truth of this — Martha may have got herself tied up in the peerage — but I do know that her loyalty is profound and was displayed one evening when she said, 'Lord Gort's not one of them roarin' generals that disturb people's minds on Armistace Days; he's a fine gentleman.'

I could see the dear old 'roarin' generals' of the parades; and since Martha's remark, the most senior ranks of the army have become unaccountably associated in my mind with the stove called Primus; the roaring and quiet kind.

## FRONT TO BACK

The British Army was under the command of the French Commander-in-Chief and this, we were assured, was in itself equal to a major victory because in the former war it had taken years of disaster to win unity of command.

The news I heard from the radio at seven o'clock on the morning of May 28th was, as usual, quite bad, despite the bulletin's insistence on the overwhelming losses suffered by the enemy, and the grand reports of heroic action by the R.A.F.; and I saw that I would be hard put to it when I reached the office in my morning attempts to explain (away) the menacing situation.

The navy always offered me the safest anchorage; but I had not reached the vital importance of command of the sea with which I invariably ended on bad days, being heavily engaged envisaging a rather curved kind of line we would doubtless establish in Belgium, with a northerly flank on inundations and a southerly based on the end of the Maginot Line extension, when a book salesman came in and remarked shortly, 'The Belgians have packed up!'

The traveller was not perturbed; nor were we, particularly, when we joined him in an incredulous kind of laugh.

But Monsieur Reynaud, when he broadcast the information, was deeply perturbed; and expressed himself in no uncertain terms. He seemed to me particularly effective when he said, 'This is a fact without precedent in history'.

Mr. Churchill was more sympathetic, begging us to suspend judgment. At a later date, doubtless with better information than we have had, he seemed to permit us to give more or less free rein to our thoughts. Perfectly horrible stories of treachery now began to circulate throughout London; even, it was suggested, King Leopold had been a party to a scheme to entice our army and some French army corps into Belgium to be trapped.

But however one looked at it then, it seemed a sorry

business, notably when it was asserted that no notice was given to the British or French commanders. Personally, my feelings of condemnation were considerably modified when I later met a young staff officer from British G.H.Q. He seemed to be rather amused at the deep significance given to the Belgian surrender. He thought the Belgian army, cut off from its domestic supplies and only partially mechanized, largely with bicycles, he said, could offer no resistance to the German advance; and that while the situation had been aggravated by the capitulation of King Leopold, it could hardly have been made much worse. Still later, I began to wonder if King Leopold knew much more about the French Army than we apparently knew; and I do not think we should lightly dismiss the evidence of the American ambassador to Belgium who asserts that King Leopold actually did give the French general two days' notice. And there is this to be said: not a hair of King Leopold's own head need have been hurt. There would have been a warm welcome offered him in England had he left his army to its fate; a fate which must have seemed inevitable to him. And with the passing of weeks and months, there is no evidence to show that King Leopold has been enjoying himself as a guest of the Germans.

In the meantime we continued to wait, finally with our eyes fixed on the Belgian coast. The German communiqués, like those of the last war, either fantastically untruthful or coldly accurate, seemed to accept the capitulation, or annihilation, of the British Army as a foregone conclusion; and a glance at the map, with even a scanty knowledge of strategy as we followed the retreat as sketchily outlined in our own bulletins, seemed to show that the Germans were not seriously exaggerating the desperate position to which our unfortunate men had been reduced.

Of course, it was certain that some would escape; there

## FRONT TO BACK

was a suggestion that our own troop-carrying planes might evacuate a considerable number; and the more optimistic believed that at least twenty or thirty thousand from the units nearest the coast would make good their escape.

Personally, I continued to remain confident that the mass of the B.E.F. would reach home; but it seemed to me at the time that if disaster were inevitable, the only really sensible thing to do would be to subtract key men — the more promising officers and N.C.O.s — from all units, in order to maintain a nucleus for rebuilding our army. But while I saw common sense in this, I was well aware that the best officers and N.C.O.s would remain with their men until the end.

Apparently, Mr. Churchill had little hope of the B.E.F.'s salvation when he warned the House that he might have to impart dark and fateful tidings to members when next he addressed them. In replying, Mr. Lees Smith remarked that no matter what these tidings might be, he felt sure the Prime Minister would agree with him in believing that not even the fringes of this country's resistance had been touched.

I remain grateful to Mr. Lees Smith who, in this dark moment, expressed the confidence of the British people. The Prime Minister spoke with an intimate knowledge of the situation, and as he felt. He believed it was necessary to prepare the British people for what promised to be the greatest disaster in our history. However, he spoke as he *feared*; and should he have done so?

The British people knew very well what might happen and were actually braced to accept the worst that could happen; but they had no intention of screaming until they were really hurt. As it turned out, Mr. Churchill was wrong; and might not his gloomy forebodings have merely added to the pain in some breasts?

Hence, I remain grateful to Mr. Lees Smith upon whom the spot-light only occasionally shines.

Some months later, referring to these days, Mr. Churchill said, 'Who would have thought three months ago that our position would change so much for the better?' I am not quoting the Prime Minister with precision, but that was the gist of his question.

I could have answered the question instantly. The British people thought so; and they do not share Mr. Churchill's surprise. The only surprise I have detected amongst the British people is the painful one, that fate at this time has offered them such indifferent leadership. And this remark, with its flavour of acid, does not refer to Mr. Churchill who has the confidence of the majority of us. But I would not be true to this slight history of events as I see them, nor to myself, if I offered our doughty Prime Minister even a proportion of the fulsome praise he must suffer from the Press of the democratic world. The truth is that he stands head and shoulders above a company of mediocrities and that he is the best leader we can find. He has, actually, yet to show us. And I can gladly offer this praise: that if by any wild chance he reads these words, while instantly detecting how much more excellently he himself could have expressed my thought, he will admit their truth. After all it must be much more satisfying to work in the earth and to win from your labour a riotous border of lovely blossoms when winter is past, than to have a dozen bouquets of priceless orchids thrust in your face while winter lingers.

And so the days passed, and the climax approached.

Of course, we were deeply anxious as we thought of our men in Belgium; but not the least of our pain was caused by the blow being dealt our pride. Our army, the British Expeditionary Force bearing the proud name which had

meant so much in the former war, was being encircled, gripped in that 'pincers movement' so popular in journalese, of which we had read so much when applied to other armies. And the Germans who were playing the pipe to which we danced, treating our army as they treated the Poles, as they treated the pathetic little force of mixed regulars and territorials in Norway, were Hitler's men; not the respectable, steady soldiers of Imperial Germany; but that rabble of Jew-baiters and fantastic fanatics whose theatrical displays of martial splendour at Nazi rallies had filled us with so much contemptuous amusement. These neurotics, these half-starved crusaders of the unspeakable Nazi regime had decided to eject us from Belgium; and we were obediently leaving Belgium.

At Calais, the fact that by superb heroism a British force could delay the Nazis for a day or two was welcomed as the saving of valuable time. Less than a year ago, a two-months' siege of Calais would have seemed short.

Yet there was glory in the tragedy of Calais when from its ruined and darkened buildings there shone the serene light of human courage; and those who were of a good courage, and we who waited, were fortunate in that so splendid a stand was first pictured by one who saw no foundation upon which to build a glittering tower of eloquence, nor an excuse to blend brilliantly chosen words into a dramatic story. A sailor spoke from his heart; and the great story reached us in small words.

Admiral Somerville told of the Men of Calais one evening at the close of a nine o'clock news bulletin. Evidently he had but then returned from the doomed French port in a destroyer whose crew had berthed her with less concern than if the rattling on her decks and sides were made by hail stones, and not by the vicious fire from Nazi guns on the high land beyond. But this, in itself a fine

exploit, seemed but a naval job of work when the admiral went on to say, without obvious emotion, that he had spoken with the brigadier in command of our small forces, finding him perfectly calm yet fully aware that this must be his last contact with his own people. Because there could be no surrender, the fate of himself and his men was inevitable; and they were not dismayed.

The picture was one of silence, if emotionless silence may be pictured; the prelude to an exploit of deathless gallantry differed little from the chance meeting of two senior officers in a mess anteroom.

I have taken no pains to record the precise words used by Admiral Somerville on that lovely summer's evening when the world was so dark to us; and this is well, for in themselves they could not boast the grand significance his simple manliness lent them. A sailor spoke to us, one who seemed the captain of a ship whose frightened passengers eagerly sought the courage he could give them; and which he gave with a deep tenderness and understanding not hidden by his pleasantly serene voice. We were to be of good courage: there was trouble, even disaster, ashore; but in the sea lay our refuge and our strength.

The captain had said so.

'Now,' said Admiral Somerville finally, 'I must go back to my duty. Good night.'

And as I now sit at my desk in London, compressing, polishing and trying to improve what I wrote when these awful events were near, the sky above is occasionally rent by sharp explosions and the ominous drone of a Nazi raider, who may kill some of us at any moment, becomes insistent. But the elderly taxi-driver standing, smoking his pipe, with his hands in his pockets on the corner opposite my window merely glances towards the explosion with interest; the girls in the main office are chatting and laughing

## FRONT TO BACK

while their typewriters go like mad, and the only deep interest I have in this particular period of 'alert' is that it gives me a chance to emphasize that the spirit of the Men of Calais is the spirit of the British people, dwelling in all kinds of people — gay little typists, shop girls, harassed mothers of families who do charring to eke out their husbands' wages, old men, young men and children. All know they must stand firm, and not be dismayed.

The unhappy wretch in the aeroplane above may blow some of us into smithereens, but he may not add to his scanty ration one small potato grown on British soil. All is well, and not less well if we die. The captain from the sea has said so.

And on another radiant summer's evening; all the evenings of this fateful summer have mocked human madness; I called at the village inn on my way home to the farmhouse from London to enjoy what a farmer neighbour calls 'a smile', a half-pint of ale, in comforting society. The landlady, comely and nicely dressed as usual, was behind the bar, perhaps a little anxious now, but still maintaining her ill-defined attitude towards events, that while her small world continued to function normally and still happily, there was no point in a public character like herself darkening gloomy days. The landlord was in the tap room, his ruddy face almost lighting the newspaper he was reading.

As usual, I asked if there was any news at six o'clock; and, as usual, the landlady replied, 'We didn't listen in this evening'.

But there now hurried into the bar the landlady's married daughter who had come from a neighbouring railway junction. Quite casually she remarked, 'The boys are going through. Train loads and train loads of them'.

'They all look,' said the landlady's married daughter as

she left to take off her hat, 'as if they needed a good hot bath and to be put to bed for a week.'

It will be wise if I withdraw quietly from the epic of Dunkirk, so far beyond my powers of description. It is too much for me in the same way that it was too much for the Tommy who, after days of fierce fighting and a critical pause on the sands of Dunkirk, followed by an adventurous journey attended by German dive bombers across the channel in an outboard motor-boat (which occasionally broke down), remarked when he landed at a seaside resort on the South Coast, 'I've always wanted to have a holiday here!'

And was it lack of sensibility in the other Tommy who, when carried off his feet by a particularly big sea off Dunkirk, shouted to his approaching rescuers, 'Hurry up, mates — I'm getting my feet wet!'

## CHAPTER VI

A COMEDIAN who has enjoyed great popularity in London during recent years remarked the other day that while he considered Mr. Churchill a great speaker, he did not think the Prime Minister could be nearly so 'darn funny' as himself. The remark interested me when I thought of both men.

The actor is possibly in his early thirties; Mr. Churchill is over sixty. The actor has a lively, vivacious presence and is not ill-looking; the years have turned the once comely Winston Churchill into something resembling a somnolent, British bull-dog. The actor can pour forth a torrent of rapidly spoken and excellently enunciated words; Mr. Churchill's speech is subject to disconcerting pauses and occasionally becomes a little thick almost to the point of muttering. The actor is a trained professional and talks as such; Mr. Churchill gives emphasis to a vital passage in the tones of an amateur, sometimes not unlike a schoolboy reciting.

Yet Mr. Churchill is justly acknowledged throughout the English-speaking world to be a great speaker, and when he wants to amuse, can be funnier, or more deliciously amusing, in one improvised phrase than the actor can be with a thousand or two cleverly composed and carefully studied words.

Mr. Churchill never permits himself to use one unnecessary word in expressing a thought; and the words he does use are so carefully chosen that, commonplace and ordinary as some of them are, they become adorned with an admirable appropriateness. 'Glare' is a common enough English word; but when Mr. Churchill spoke of the 'Nazi glare' in the direction of Germany's then neutral neighbours,

the small word was given an intangible touch of humour and magically enlarged to contain the sinister and terrible, actually all that has since happened to those unfortunate neutrals. He has spoken of Hitler's successes as glittering, glittering like paste and tinsel as opposed to the deep worth of shining jewels. And all eventual value in Hitler's conquests is expressed in that common adjective.

Of course, it must be admitted that Mr. Churchill enjoys superb opportunities as he stands by that curtain hiding so much we long to see; yet he never takes advantage of these opportunities in the sense of offering us less than his best.

I anticipate drinking the Prime Minister's health with wild huzzahs and the rattling of rattles within the next year or two; but, until then, I propose to exercise the right he himself insisted British people should have at a moment, not long ago, when our land was threatened by what seemed a madness born of fear and panic in the hearts of small men stalking as great.

In the hope that my frankness may not 'seem indecent even if offered to the enemy' I propose to write of him as I believe he is seen by the courageous, if disillusioned, sheep he now leads.

Much was expected from the Prime Minister of Great Britain after Dunkirk; and we were not disappointed even when we were no more convinced than Winston Churchill was, despite his magnificent endeavour to assure us, that an obvious military disaster of the first magnitude was not a great victory.

I had heard the main points of the speech with a neighbour who paints, a man of quiet intelligence who studies the situation as it develops with a deep feeling entirely free of ill-founded optimism. We had shared the relief of the Prime Minister when we knew that under the circumstances our losses in men had been inconsiderable; and the tale of our

## FRONT TO BACK

abandoned material had been tragically impressive when the Prime Minister pictured the mountain of work we must climb to re-arm our main forces; but when we strolled down to his gate, my neighbour whispered cautiously, 'In spite of what the old boy says, I think it *was* a great victory which will prove to be critical when the war's over'.

'And so do I!' I agreed, in an equally cautious whisper.

Not that anyone could have heard us had we shouted, or that anyone would have minded if they had; but these were strange days in England when to be cheerful and hopeful was to be thought 'complacent' and something of a national menace.

It was plainly the duty of Mr. Churchill to emphasize the disastrous aspect of the Belgian campaign; but we saw no reason why we should ignore the cheerful implications in Dunkirk. There were many.

When a fine army, in hazard through no fault of its own, has survived the death embrace of an enemy, and has succeeded in retreating behind impregnable frontiers where it may rest, re-arm and multiply itself a thousandfold, the disaster inherent in a forced retreat is considerably lightened, and a song or two of happy relief may be sung with perfect propriety. It is for the enemy in such a case to wail even while he sorts the booty.

The Belgian campaign had been rich in lessons. The navy would see to it that enough time was given to apply them.

The British soldiers had met the new German armies, and plainly, the knowledge had not depressed them.

Dunkirk demonstrated that when the navy wanted to carry out a mission of vital importance, it carried out that mission without serious reference to enemy disapproval.

Dunkirk offered a hint to some Luftwaffe-frightened spirits in Britain that the R.A.F. could command at least

an area of important sky in the teeth of all Goering could bring in opposition.

And, finally, Dunkirk produced for the Nazis a gay armada of amateur sailors sweeping across the channel, often manning craft beside which an early Briton's coracle would have seemed a liner, a lively display clearly insisting that ALL the British people would fight, that there was no civilian flank in British resistance to be murderously attacked, and turned.

When a surgeon can only prune a tumour, he may bring present relief; but he knows that in postponing death he has risked making death more certain. The image is unlovely; but the British Army was merely pruned; and Hitler may possibly live to regret that pruning when the Nazi body shows signs of decay.

In village churches throughout the country, in the big parish churches and cathedrals of the towns and cities, we had asked God to help us barely a week before Dunkirk; and many accepted the successful evacuation as a direct answer to prayer; but 'God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform', and few of us could see much mystery in the wonder of Dunkirk. One or two hardened old cynics, men who fought in France during the last war, dared to suggest even now that there was evidence to show that salvation from the Germans in Belgium was only the prelude to the miracle being wrought. These cynics, very much in the minority and quite unpopular, seemed to believe that in answering our prayers, God was faced with the choice of two alternatives — either to give us a decisive victory which would settle the Nazis finally, or to have us forcibly ejected from France and Belgium. The spectacle of a return to static warfare, with each day in the years marked by the close of thousands of fine young lives, appalled these cynics.

But no matter how calmly and confidently we might still

## FRONT TO BACK

regard the situation during moments of careful thought, it would be wrong to suggest that the prevailing atmosphere in Britain was anything but gloomy when the relief given by Dunkirk had passed. The hours and days were heavy with fear.

'I'm not a bit frightened of the Germans,' said a Wing Commander of the last war to me; 'but I'm terrified of us.'

It would not be easy to explain what he meant in few words, or many. You had to be in Britain in those days to know, to sense that quivering in foundations and structure caused, simply, by the Nazi genius in producing startling surprises and swiftly profiting by them. The collapse of international honour had become more than a pious phrase; its destruction had left us almost unarmed. The danger could be met by silent steadiness; yet we ordinary people, fully conscious of our great strength and ability to make the voyage, sensed fear and unsteadiness in the region of the bridge.

'Put her head up into the wind! The gale and crashing seas will drown your voice, but not us.'

But the cry was made in nervous tones; only the captain knew if the steering gear was functioning well, or not.

It was hard to concentrate on routine work these days, and I often wandered about the London streets, trying to sense the feeling in the old city.

London has many tongues, and one spirit.

To the great she will talk with the cautious charm of the trained diplomat; to the well-born her accent shows cultured indifference; to the clever she brings subtly interwoven phrases as meaningless as their own; with those who are sad, she weeps; to the poor and brave she throws back cheerful wit as pointed as their own, and with those who praise God, she will merrily ring a thousand tuneful bells.

But her spirit is transparent and simple; and though vast like herself, quickly reflects every shade of emotion.

She quivers with delight when her broad highways, her wandering streets and tortuous alleys, bear a pageant of stately beauty, her grave and reverend citizens clad in colour varied as the centuries she has known. In melancholy, contentedly profound, she bows her head in dignified grief when her pavements echo the tread of men marching slowly, when the roll of gun-carriage wheels whisper hoarsely, 'A king has passed!'

She will sing with the merry, clasp the hands of strangers and even riot with the riotous, defying her police when the first moments of a fresh year are added to her ancient store.

One day in early June, after Dunkirk and immediately before the second phase of the French campaign opened, I had lunched with an old friend in her home in Knightsbridge overlooking Hyde Park; and because the day was radiant and the parks attractive, I decided to walk back to the office a very long way round — through the Green Park, along part of the Mall, across St. James's Park and through Downing Street to Whitehall. From Whitehall, I would cross Trafalgar Square and then up Charing Cross Road back to dull old Bloomsbury.

I wanted to read the spirit of London, active, I felt in this area.

There had been something strangely unreal about the *tête à tête* luncheon in my old friend's beautiful home where the maids, the pictures, the exquisite old furniture and Persian rugs, the priceless silver and even the perfect kind of meal I had enjoyed were friends of thirty years' standing. As I glanced at my hostess who has always adorned a gracious setting, I knew, strangely enough, that the threatened passing of the era to which she belonged dis-

## FRONT TO BACK

turbed her infinitely less than her guest who had known only a world of contriving, of adventure and insecurity. I felt proud in the knowledge that her head, given added beauty by the years, would still be held high no matter what the weeks, or even days, might bring.

I was awakened from this dream by my hostess remarking sharply, 'They were given all the money they needed, and there was more. The brains of the country were at their disposal, as well as the brawn. And what have they done? Look here, if you write in your book that the British people were devoted to the Chamberlain Government, you're calling them fools and telling what is untrue.'

'And,' she went on, 'don't forget what I told you in September 1938, that we had given Germany a heavy thrashing in 1918 and were capable of giving her another if she needed it. The former Government may have delayed it; nothing it has done will make it lighter.'

The Green Park was quietly sleeping with those, apparently homeless, who are always found stretched on the grass in the shade of the tall trees and hawthorns. Except for some defensive works and A.R.P. arrangements, constructed in 1938 and mellowed by the wind, rain and snow of a hard winter, Green Park seemed unaware of the war.

The sentries at Buckingham Palace were in battle dress, a scruffy, if useful, uniform which, nevertheless, accentuated the emphasized smartness of the guards on duty. Above the palace, the Royal Standard flew bravely in its rich colouring; and the great flower beds surrounding the Victoria Memorial were a blaze of colour and obviously still given efficient attention.

No one with whom I have talked about the war since September 1939 has heard me utter a word not expressing complete confidence in its outcome. I do not hate easily;

but only the half-witted and obviously neurotic who have suggested the possibility of defeat have been spared my immediate detestation. Indeed, I fear my complete confidence has often been expressed so belligerently, and with so much intolerance, that friends, as confident as myself, have been forced to defend views they actually dislike. Nevertheless, in the deep secrecy of this record, I am bound to confess that despite the considered judgment upon which my faith is based, I shared the prevailing fear of these days.

Therefore I did not dismiss as monstrous the suggestion in the thought which came to me when I contemplated the Palace with its Royal Standard, the guards marching so smartly, and the well-tended flower gardens. The royal palace at The Hague doubtless offered a similar picture on May 9th, 1939!

Buckingham Palace was alive and as alert as ever, for the King was in residence; but the windows in the great houses and minor palaces facing the Mall gazed sadly over the tree-tops as if aware that their owners might soon exchange the broad avenue of privilege for tangled pathways before the trees had lost their leaves.

St. James's Park was crowded with people enjoying the sunshine from chairs and forms lining the lake where innumerable waterfowl rushed hither and thither to grab tit-bits before the circling sea-gulls could pounce. The gardens were, as ever, a blaze of lovely flowers, not less attractive to a frustrated back yard London gardener who suspected cheating in the probable picture of an army of park gardeners arriving betimes in the morning with loads of potted flowers, grown and tended in cleaner air.

The many children playing near their elders were as happy and free from the fear brooding over London as the strange, shabby old men upon whose shoulders cheeky

## FRONT TO BACK

little sparrows perched, twittering with deep cupboard love as they pecked crumbs from delighted old lips.

'This — all this of our beautiful London cannot be taken away, cannot cease to be,' I thought as I watched the children, the old men and the waterfowl; and envied their insensibility to events.

Having crossed a bridge, I reached the more shady side of the lake where three or four gardeners were busy with cunning little lawn mowers designed to shave the narrower strips of lawn between flower beds and the water. Not one blade of unruly grass might be left to destroy the velvet of the lawns.

There could, of course, be no significance in this normal gardening procedure; yet that day I felt I was watching an important ceremony which might not recur. The lawn shaving was the tiniest tributary in the vast river of London's organization; but would there be any organization if the heart of our city were broken?

There was great activity in that part of St. James's Park where it adjoins the Downing Street and Whitehall neighbourhood. Highly efficient-looking barbed-wire entanglements were being arranged here as in many parts of London, and neat fortified posts completed by tall Guards-men freely perspiring in the heat as they patted each sandbag to make it accept its allotted place in the wall.

I was perplexed. Against what form of attack could these fortifications be effective?

Parachutists?

But in the serried rows of London streets with their tall buildings what number of parachutists could possibly concentrate which might not be effectively, and less melodramatically, dealt with by the police, who would march them off to instant internment?

These preparations were indeed startling. Those in

power who knew had evidently learnt great respect for Nazi dash and initiative if they could admit the possibility of the enemy piercing our defences and reaching the nerve centre of the city and Empire.

If there were good and urgent reasons for turning London into a fortified post, the situation must be alarming; but if those who had ordered this deforming were pursued by Fear, then disaster was inevitable.

Did the authorities imagine that bands of Fifth Columnists, or members of the British Union of Fascists, would band together to sieze Government buildings? If so, their faith in the London police must be slight if they dared risk encouraging an already pride-swollen enemy by a demonstration of preparedness which seemed abject to me.

Evidently, a Cabinet meeting was being held in Downing Street. The small space outside Number 10 was crowded with official cars. I paused for a moment or two, joining the company of curious persons waiting on the kerb opposite to see whose picture the Press photographers would snap. Occasionally the door was opened by an elderly butler with a fresh complexion and an air of calm imperturbability which contrasted sharply with that atmosphere of suppressed excitement.

Suddenly a tall thin man of middle age in the crowd next to me, almost certainly a Tommy of the last war, remarked, 'Wot 'ave they all got the wind up abawt? Ain't we got a navy? 'As the channel gone and dried up, or can 'Itler swim?'

I admitted that I had already asked myself similar questions.

'The Jerry air force,' cried the man contemptuously, gazing at me with fierce concentration, 'I 'aven't noticed it abawt 'ere lately. 'Ave you?'

## FRONT TO BACK

I had not, and said so: being inclined to agree that the Luftwaffe had not come because the R.A.F. objected.

'I don't know,' repeated the man more gently, and now with a note of perplexity; 'I don't know just why they've got the wind up so bad.'

Since I could detect no sign that anyone of supreme importance would soon emerge from Number 10 to stir the Press photographers into galvanic life, and being without the patience of the little crowd waiting on the kerb, I walked along Downing Street into Whitehall, now determined to hurry back to the office.

As I reached the Cenotaph, I saw that all men, and not the usual few, reverently lifted their hats. The growing carelessness succeeding the emotional years after 1918 had gone. The million spirits of the Cenotaph, who had died that we might live without fear, had regained vital importance.

I left the traffic of the sidewalk and crossed to the shrine, knowing that on this island of silence in the tides of noisy traffic the perplexity of wire entanglements and blockhouses in Whitehall would pass — unexplained, because there was no explanation beyond a suggestion that perhaps old London loves a pageant; and the wire and sandbags were hardly more.

Doubtless like others of my generation near the Cenotaph that day, my mind had flown back to the days between 1914 and 1918. Had we who were soldiers twenty-five years ago been disturbed by what might happen? Had we seen our country in awful hazard? Had our imagination pictured defeat, and the awful consequences of defeat?

The tall shrine remained cool and silent in the warm June sunshine; there was no stirring in the folds of the lovely flags poised so perfectly; and there was no trembling of the leaves in the garlands of laurel and dark red poppies.

But an answer came, clear and simple — 'No! You were young then.'

And now, I thought, I must pray.

As I retraced my steps along Whitehall to the Unknown Warrior's grave I recalled how fervently British people had prayed in 1914. The answer had, we thought, been victory; now, we knew, we had only been given a truce and a test.

It was easy to look back and to see only the startling and notorious, the merely glittering — a long vista of motion pictures, jazz bands, male crooners and the more deadly female species, eruptions of grease paint on the lovely skins of our women, painted finger nails on dirty hands, a pride-smiting abdication and other *causes célèbres*, Pop-eye, Mickey Mouse, Jimmy Thomas, and Donald Duck. But the million spirits from the now receding Cenotaph whispered that surf from the clean ocean is froth and often foul, but not important. Good men and good women had worked silently.

Trying to find a reason for our failure, I had begun at the beginning and, passing Versailles, I had reached the French invasion of the Ruhr when, many of us saw even then, the French had turned the first sod of a grave, involving us in an inevitable funeral, involving us because we had sinned against the light in not forcibly stopping them, even to the point of joining with our late enemies. In the twenty years' truce which was a test, we had failed in wisdom; and God, who will instantly forgive a sinner, has been silent on the fate of fools.

Happily there was not time to consider whether those people were right or wrong (I think them as wrong as the Devil) who insist that in 1918 we should have invaded Germany up to the hilt and given her folks a taste of warfare, for I had now reached the Abbey.

## FRONT TO BACK

A few quiet people were lingering near the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior; but they were lost in the shadows when a ray of light from clearer glass in a great window became focused on an elderly man, kneeling alone by the great brass slab which bore a wreath or two of poppies to whom the days with their dust had given a rich shade of dark maroon.

I judged the elderly man to be a retired officer, for his plentiful white hair was only sufficiently long to permit a neat parting; and he wore a closely clipped moustache. His figure was slim, and I knew that when he stood, he would stand erect. He was well, even elegantly, dressed with that reserve which can mark the conventional English gentleman.

Conventional English gentlemen do not often kneel alone in public places; but because this one was obviously unaware that his posture might be worthy of attention, the picture he made was perfectly natural.

As I stood watching from a little distance, I began to know that the kneeling man was alone in the great nave with the Unknown Warrior. Both were communing with God.

And then I knew that although as a nation we had fallen short of the glory of an ideal; that ideal was met here enshrined in common dust more precious to us than fine gold. All that was best and noblest in our national consciousness — defence of the weak, knightly conduct in warfare, supreme courage and tenacity, a glowing sense of fun, love of our dear country — all were enshrined in the dust of an unknown soldier, called now to be our advocate.

The vision at the tomb was one of steadiness and a closely-knit defence, a complete faith beside which the picture in Whitehall — the block-houses and wire entanglements, the commotion in Downing Street — smelt of panic

and seemed but a looseness and uncertainty which might breed despair.

It would have been sacrilege to join the old gentleman at the tomb; therefore I wandered to a neighbouring chapel and prayed for my country. There could be no importunity in my prayers. I could not say, 'Oh God, give us victory; and let this thing pass!' I must watch, rather than pray; watch a pattern being woven in colours irrevocably dyed in past years, knowing well that if we are right we must prevail over evil; and that if we have not been wise, we must pay.

And the price will be paid. The Empire will march on more nobly with better, wiser impulses in the radiance shed from the growing army of our brave dead. And although we said that in 1914, and again in 1918, we know that after 1940 there will be no choice.

And thus old London spoke in the warmth of that lovely day in June. Alas, she hardly knew what she was at in her deep perplexity; laughing and gay with the children and flowers in the park, absurd in her dramatic military improvisation, trembling in fear, overflowing with uncontrolled emotion, her thought jostling thought like coloured glass in a kaleidoscope; and gaining strength and courage when, if only for a moment, she returned to her God.



P A R T F O U R

S U M M E R 1940



## CHAPTER I

AFTER Dunkirk, we enjoyed a feverish kind of breathing space while Hitler, we hoped, was licking his wounds and working furiously to replace a big proportion of his infantry, much of his artillery, most of his tanks and the immense number of aircraft shot down by the R.A.F. and the French airmen.

The French were engaged in arranging a defensive line instantly called the Weygand Line. There was great talk about 'defence in depth', a little phrase picked up by military correspondents who in their inmost hearts must have found great difficulty in urging us to hope that where carefully constructed concrete works and cunning tank traps had failed, improvisations — they could be hardly more in the time left for their construction — would succeed. I expect the military correspondents knew that no matter how exquisitely a defensive line may be constructed, its effective defence invariably gets down to the bayonet even when a bayonet is never fixed; and there must be bayonets and stout eager hearts controlling its entire length.

The idea apparently was to digest infiltrating tanks rather than to stop them; and it almost seemed to our ears as if nothing could be more delightful for the defence than initial infiltration.

And then, we were assured, the French had got the measure of both the dive bombers and the new heavy Nazi tanks. Also, we gathered, the truly awful problem of refugee-clogged roads had gone a long way towards being solved.

On the whole, we could contemplate the renewal of the battle, if not with complete confidence, then with good hope.

## FRONT TO BACK

Paris was air-raidèd while Mr. Duff Cooper was about to lunch with a large number of French personages. In a vivid broadcast he was able to picture the gentlemen, who had apparently entered the great dining-room when the alarm sounded, awaiting the return of the waiters who, obeying orders, had withdrawn to shelter. The hungry gentlemen had devoured the *petits pains* on the table and doubtless would have begun on the orchids if the All Clear had not sounded, permitting the meal to begin with French gastronomical efficiency and to progress with exquisite precision. It made one's mouth water.

Personally, I enjoyed this broadcast as I enjoy all Mr. Duff Cooper's broadcasts. He is frightened of nothing, not even of making eager mistakes and dropping occasional bricks on the heads of the newspapers who, Mr. Duff Cooper is well aware, can retort with devastating effect. However, the newspapers are aware that as Minister of Information, Mr. Duff Cooper fathers a most difficult child and they do show sympathy.

This particular broadcast about Paris annoyed some people. I do not know why. It was said that Mr. Duff Cooper and all the gentlemen should have set an example and gone to earth with the waiters; others seemed to think he gave an impression of himself as a character from Ouida, living in a luxurious world which had become rather fabulous.

Mr. Churchill made his famous speech in the Commons which many thought must live when our children are dead. Now, apparently, with more detailed information of the King Leopold surrender, he could call it 'a pitiful episode' — a safe term to apply, of course; no one could doubt the pity of it. He seemed to think that only a rapid retreat to Amiens and the South could have saved the French and British armies fighting in Belgium when the German eruption at

Sedan showed signs of working as effectively as a scythe, and he regretted that the order to retreat had been vitally delayed.

He was, I think, working on the assumption that such a withdrawal would, or could, have been made through refugees at a constant speed maintained by both armies; and that the Germans would have been forced to exert an equally constant pressure. Mr. Churchill was obviously right, or so it seemed to us; and he was speaking with an infinitely deeper knowledge of the French armies than any of us could dare to boast.

Personally, and admittedly writing with a bleached after-the-event knowledge, I think that such a withdrawal would have saved the British and French armies from the menacing German sausage, and left them as meat in a sandwich to be duly accepted by the German maw.

Incidentally, it now seemed curious to many of us that the knowledge of their French neighbours enjoyed by our army commanders was a factor in the nature of that faith which promises to move mountains, and doesn't. We have not to live in the same street with Mr. Jones, or even Mr. Smith, for eight months, without knowing what both are likely to do under given circumstances.

In the light of after events, there is deep pathos in Mr. Churchill's peroration — 'The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. We shall fight on the seas and oceans . . . We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, in the streets and in the hills. We shall never surrender . . .'

One of the more deadly acts of this Nazi war is the revolution it has achieved in simple words. In the South Seas, the word beach has high significance, since it is used

## FRONT TO BACK

in the sense that the word town is used here. Town gossip becomes beach gossip; and what the beach says in Suva, for instance, means something. But in Britain, a beach had been merely a place where the land accepted the sea without the opposition of rocks and headlands, a place where people sat, or from whence Mr. and Mrs. Jones went forth to wade with the young Joneses, he with his trousers rolled up and boots slung over arm, she with voluminous cotton skirts held in capable hands. Now, since Dunkirk, and Mr. Churchill's famous speech, 'the beaches' have assumed a deeply sinister note with their sand caked with the blood of soldiers.

'And even if,' said Mr. Churchill, 'which I do not for a moment believe, this island, or a large part of it, were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British fleet, would carry on the struggle until in God's good time, the new world with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and liberation of the old.'

God knows I have no desire to attempt anything approaching a sneer at what is undoubtedly grandeur in expression, nor to be sententious when I am aware of the awful responsibility resting on the shoulders of our Prime Minister whose ability to go on living under the battering of disastrous information he must suffer is in itself a miracle; but the fact remains that while the majority of British people said, rather touchingly, 'He has talked like that because he knows we can take it!' the general effect of this speech was undoubtedly depressing on those around me, and, I think, added a little to the great burden we have been forced to carry.

I had only read excerpts from the speech issued in the Stop Press sections of the evening papers as I travelled home; but its summary offered gloomily by an old farmer in the village inn chilled my blood. 'Mr. Churchill says we'll soon be fighting in the meadows and village lanes!'

## S U M M E R 1940

We have not fought on the beaches of Britain, nor on the landing grounds; neither have we done battle in the streets or hills of our country; and few British people who are fighting the Nazis with their hearts, souls and bodies believed that we should. We, the ordinary people, have complete faith in the navy; and not a little in ourselves to take whatever the Germans may decide to offer in the way of Germans. They have won the contempt of our sailors; can we offer them less? I have no patience with any rhetorical visions showing even a conceivable defeat. It is the duty of leaders to note dangerous pitfalls and to issue warnings without, surely, dangling those who follow them over the deepest depths.

Still it is in no mood of monstrous impertinence that I dare to say that Mr. Churchill is doing well, or to suggest what I think to be true, that a true understanding of British resistance cannot be gained if it is believed, simply, that he leads and we follow. An intangible spirit, which was yet clear above the drone of gloom from some of the more articulate amongst us, spoke quite clearly at this time throughout Britain — we British people have no intention of regarding the outcome of this struggle as anything else but successful. That is the beginning, the middle, and the end of our creed, not a tail-piece in the way of Amen at the close of a sad hymn!

I believe that Mr. Churchill hears that voice above the battering of disastrous information he is bound to receive, and that it is guiding him in his guiding. He has always been a brilliant man; that voice has commanded him to be a great man, offering a love and devotion so touching that ambition, wealth, and fame are reduced to the faint twinkle of candle light in its glowing sun.

Too much has been said which has proved to be futile; and it might be noted by those who feel that an event, joyous

## FRONT TO BACK

in effect or the reverse, is a pipe from which to blow iridescent bubbles, that, even as words, silence and salvation stand harmoniously; and that Fear, no matter how felicitously disguised, remains man's deadliest enemy, destroying the music in many a robust word and always remaining out of tune with luck. Baron Munchausen conceived the notion of freezing sound and told of a postillion's horn playing merrily when thawed out in a Russian inn; it is a pity that many outpourings these days could not be likewise frozen and let loose, or dropped at the North Pole, only when this struggle is over.

While the French were busy building their defence in depth, we in England were working with equal zeal to make the country safe from the surprises which had helped to destroy Holland and Belgium. The Local Defence Volunteers, later to be called the Home Guard, were showing a magnificent spirit, keeping a wary eye on every square yard of the land so that parachutists might be given a suitable reception wherever they might land. They showed great tact, too, in refusing to shoot, without close investigation, courting couples down village lanes!

Others of us were concerned with arranging obstructions across the larger meadows to make the landing of troop-carrying aeroplanes extremely hazardous. Having helped a large number of local men to obstruct one meadow, I came to the conclusion at the end of one day's work that even a butterfly would crash if it attempted to land on that field.

As a matter of fact, the working bee was wholly delightful even if the work was extremely hard to those of us who never dig except when we want to dig. You could not let up, or take frequent spells, because that gave the man digging the next hole a chance to get ahead and triumphantly to thrust his old railway sleeper, or young pine log, into the

earth and begin on another while you were still struggling. The work became easier, too, when stuck to.

The meadow was some distance from the farm-house and so I gave a lift in my car to a couple of neighbours; and such was my zeal and patriotism that I could contemplate, without much pain, the rending of leather car cushions and interior linings by savage looking picks, spades and mattocks which were forced with my big passengers into the small sports coupé.

The directions given to us seemed good, and off we went to Brook Farm, only to find when we reached there that we should really have gone to Brookside Farm. We cursed the man who had given the directions. At Brookside Farm, they told us that Brook's Farm, a farm worked by Mr. Brook at one time, was really our destination. We forgave the man who had given the directions. We failed to find Brook's Farm for a long time until two nice looking women marching along the road carrying a basket between them gave us precise directions.

This business of digging a hole four feet six in depth, and not much more than eighteen inches in diameter, may sound simple enough until it is tried. The first two spits may be dug out without complication; but after that, difficulty increases unless you have made a narrow trench for your feet. Any economy of effort in the making of this trench must be paid for heavily as you get deeper. It interested me to note that in so simple a business a well tried-out system had been established.

The land on this big Brook's Farm meadow must have expected this infiltration of its fair surface, judging by the effective defences in depth it had arranged. A dry summer had made the earth cement-like any way; but apart from this, a flinty stratum immediately under the tough matted turf made plain digging impossible and called for a pick and

## FRONT TO BACK

shovel. After eighteen inches of this, a semi-rock layer had to be delved through, a slow and strenuous process owing to lack of space in the deepening hole. It was important not to have the hole too wide because it had to support a heavy post of some height. It was with exultation that we reached what we called cheese, a grey clay which came out kindly in smooth sections. An inquiry in the guise of a greeting, 'Have you got to the cheese yet?' was often heard shouted across the meadow.

At four-thirty, the two nice-looking women we had seen on the road with the basket, and who had since established a small camp under the tall hedge, made a signal; and we dropped our tools and enjoyed excellent cups of tea and neat little buns.

The work was hard, but it exerted a powerful fascination. At last we were permitted to do something for the country. The tea interval was quite short.

When a hole had been completed, certain men assigned to the job came to lift the very heavy post into position; but you were left to do the ramming, a dull job and abandoned with satisfaction when the great post stood firm as a rock ready to tear the guts out of any Hun-carrying planes.

The sequel to this effort on Brook's Farm meadow was not very happy. The farmer who worked it had really been obliged by regulations to plough it in exchange, I understand, for an adequate bounty. He had decided to get a crop of hay off it first; and then an unusually dry spring had made ploughing impossible. Shortly after we had so effectively obstructed it, the authorities came down on the farmer and fined him something like £20, ordering him to plough the meadow the moment the land had moistened. I warned his wife that they would have a horrible job hauling out our posts which, being staggered in arrangement, blocked ploughing. She said, 'Oh, they'll have to come and do that!'

I do not know whom 'they' are. I am not one of them. I was about to add that I would rather pull out my teeth until I realized what a very simple process that has become recently.

An alarming sign in this our free Britain was the tragic-comic effect of some regulations designed to prevent the spread of gloom and pessimism, and others conceived to catch traitors. I expect there were many cases treated tactfully and sensibly and consequently without news value; but one or two published in the Press, without comment, gave the impression that it only needed the turning back of the centuries to let us contemplate quite a number of bloody Judge Jeffreys. A country rector, possibly a well-meaning thorn in the sides of his neighbours, and probably rather stupid and tactless, bleated that he had not been properly notified by his bishop when accused in court of persisting in ringing his church bell, now reserved as a signal of danger from parachutists. Remarking that the case was serious, the magistrates sentenced the rector to a short prison sentence. This little eruption of the ancient rivalry between church and king aroused no more than amused comment.

A golf club manager overheard three men on the first tee greeting each other with a 'Heil Hitler' as they gave the Nazi salute, and instantly reported them to the police. There was a little case about the incident which allowed us to see something of the club manager's point of view, notably when it was deposed that one of the men had urged care in the use of the Nazi greeting, and when it was noted that the men had foreign-sounding names. The case was dismissed with a caution, and the golf club manager commended; but it filled many of us with awful misgivings because it was not unusual for the most loyal lieges of the King in Britain to 'Heil Hitler' and to lift up an arm in the Nazi salute as a signal of facetiousness. Both were abandoned to a large extent after this case.

## FRONT TO BACK

There was no protest that I heard against this revolution in our usually sensible and trusting enough attitude towards our neighbours. Deciding that authority thought it necessary, we exerted care, accepted the restrictions on our liberty in the knowledge that difficulty must be shared in difficult times. Some of us, indeed, felt unworthy stirrings in our own hearts when, occasionally, we felt an impulse to report this one or that when he spoke ill-advisedly, or disagreed with us too belligerently. The general effect was bad in that it stifled free discussion, and forbade debate on a vital subject.

Later, Mr. Churchill showed a rare appreciation of an irritating situation when, in a few happy phrases, he expressed the protest we did not care to make, and took effective steps to establish a process whereby emphatic sentences could be lightened, or quashed, away from the glare of hot local blood. Our poise was thus magically restored; care remained necessary, but freedom was restored, including, alas, the right to bore our neighbours to tears with well-authenticated war stories, few of which we, or they, really believed.

All sign-posts had been removed from the countryside, and place names painted out on railway stations and business houses. This was almost indecent to the Nazi parachutists some people expected to see cycling about the countryside because, even with the sign-posts, it requires quite a good local knowledge to be able to avoid returning to your starting point if you want to get anywhere in many parts of Britain. This decapitation of the highly efficient sign-posts in the country impressed local people who felt it their solemn duty 'to tell nowt' to perplexed motorists lost in the maze of country lanes and roads.

Aliens of all kinds who had hitherto escaped internment had been rounded up following an intense newspaper

campaign; and because the times had lost all composure in the rush of events, this had to be done with an inclusiveness which probably netted many more innocent folks than potential enemies. Holland had trusted with fatal results; we dared not trust. Some of us feared we dared not trust our common sense. Sixty was the age limit at first; but this was raised to seventy when it was realized that treachery, like man, might have an allotted span of three score years and ten.

The evening newspapers in particular were hot on the traitor hunt, and commendably so; one in particular becoming deliciously comic later when, with equal commendability, it led a grand crusade for the freeing of useful aliens who had more reasons to loathe Hitler than we ourselves.

I am anticipating events in order to have done with the subject; but like many others, including a member of parliament who asked a question on the subject, I was greatly struck with an article which appeared in an evening paper entitled, if I remember rightly, 'Why not intern General de Gaulle?' The idea underlying the well-written article was that if the authorities persisted in keeping under lock and key all kinds of useful professional aliens, who would gladly fight for us, they might as well make a thorough job of it, and lock up the great French general who had rallied all free Frenchmen around him, and who promised to be of immense value in our common struggle.

And the idea was a good one and succeeded in not appearing to be a little silly, or boyish, which it risked, even if it did make the newspaper appear a trifle naive when Sir John Anderson, in replying to the question in the House, remarked that he was aware of some inconsistency in the newspaper concerned, and thus inspiring an invariably lively section of that newspaper, which acts as a benign

## FRONT TO BACK

Greek chorus to editorial pronouncements, to say that it was not inconsistent at all; and this made some people think that it probably was, very. When a newspaper defends itself outside the courts it literally oozes virtue. Most of us seemed to feel, without bothering to look up back numbers, that *all* the evening newspapers had been hot on the alien hunt.

There were defeatists about; but, praise God, and here lies British strength, they were seldom of the common, ordinary British people. Defeatism pitifully emerged from the ranks of young people not in uniform, through no fault of their own, who were perhaps a little embittered by their failure to find work for their country. Those I came across were university men of intelligence without much experience or really useful information about common things, people who had never been seriously short of money but who could bemuse their minds, and genuinely rend their hearts, with awful pronouncements about the conditions under which the poor lived. The type is common. The youthful blushing of socialistic, university days is in the process of bleaching to the comfortable white of maturer years, but still remains pink and still unable to see that it is only an impelling change in the hearts and minds of men, rich and poor alike, and not in a forcibly imposed change in conditions, which can bridge the awful gulf between the very rich and the very poor. Any fool can wring his hands and say, 'This is terrible; it must be changed!' A wise man has the choice of two alternatives — to shut up, or to think hard and long and to *do* something about it.

This defeatism was indefinite in form, and those who suffered from the malady were unaware of its effect on themselves and others they met. There was a case in point at a club I occasionally lunch at.

As I entered the anteroom, I saw a young pilot officer sitting on a sofa chatting with a big young man who had

been seriously disturbed by wisdom urging him to complete his studies, which would occupy a month or two, and mainly desire and enthusiasm commanding him to join up forthwith. Wisdom, in winning, had not made the completing of the studies for a final examination easy because mainly impulses, combined with the war feeling in the air, had turned the examination into something approaching an impossible hurdle. This confusion and, possibly, lack of exercise, had affected the big young man's liver to the extent that, while in his inmost heart he felt certain we should win, he invariably tried to make out a good case to show that we could not.

Unfortunately, the young pilot officer, whom I know, had left before I could gain a chance to hear his news. This was disappointing, because he is precisely of the type one imagines all fighter pilots to be — keen on flying, apparently without a care in the world and overflowing with youthful life. He had been concerned with strafing Nazi bombers off Dunkirk, and without doubt had a story.

I attempted to get this second-hand from the big young man. He said, 'C has had an awful time; he's just been given forty-eight hours' leave, and has to go back to it. He says that his C.O. has told him to be careful with his machine because if he loses it, it will be impossible to replace it'.

Without stopping to think that if I were C's commanding officer, I would most certainly give him a daily command not to be a young ass and risk his life and machine unnecessarily, knowing well that I might as well soliloquize, I said, 'You mean that C thinks our production is not equal to the demands on it, that our reserves are gone . . . ?'

'That's about it,' admitted the big young man grimly and then after a pause — 'I was up at Oxford yesterday. All the dons are talking about peace next October — at Hitler's terms. After all, Hitler is attempting the unifica-

## FRONT TO BACK

tion of Europe and Great Britain is, as usual, opposing that idea.'

It was, of course, easy enough to meet the latter part of the statement by admitting the supreme excellence in the conception of a European union built on goodwill and excellent endeavour; but most definitely not constructed on Hitlerian principles which were bad and consequently destructive. Hitler had his uses, perhaps, if only as a cruel disintegrating force which, if wisely controlled after the blast, might result in the rebuilding of a Europe happy in its freedom from worthy enough, if petty and obstructive, national ideals. Great Britain blanched at the awful picture of a unified Europe perched on the sinuous foundations laid by the Nazis.

I could only meet the Oxford don story with scepticism and ill-chosen abuse. The thought of our reserves in aeroplanes, notably fighters, running dry, filled me with fear even while I refused to believe it.

Generally, I felt impelled to let fly at the big young man as a rank defeatist; and we both wandered to the bar and bought each other drinks in furious disaccord, much to the joy of those who stood near.

Nevertheless, I was distressed to think that the young pilot officer had perhaps heard the pale story of the Oxford dons contemplating peace at Hitler's terms with the opening of the Michaelmas term. It would not, I knew, worry that reckless (and efficient, too) young fellow to whom the business of flying and fighting, as he risks death nearly every day of his life, is the beginning and end of a satisfying existence decorated, I imagine, with more than one lovely young thing during off hours; but he might mention the story in his mess where it could be heard by more serious young men, and give a wrong impression of civilian morale.

The reputation of Oxford for courage and tenacity in

the face of danger, or what is left of Oxford since its many fine young men have gone to fight — I was about to say, for their King and country, but prefer to show tact, and reserve in the use of the obvious — was not so high as it deserved to be. I mentioned this to a Cambridge don who urged that Oxford should not be judged harshly, and might be expected to survive the flow of Nuffield gold — sour grapes, doubtless; which made me wonder precisely how Cambridge would have accepted so heavy an insult in the Pooh Bah sense.

Another type of defeatist I know was of the not unattractive chattering kind who really means very well indeed. He has since joined the army and is doing good work, and is much too busy to think about invasions and wild dreams of parachutist landings; but before he could find work, his horizon was very bleak indeed. It was difficult to keep him off what he feared might happen. One day as I strolled with him along a London street soon after the fall of France, which had taken him even deeper into the chasms of hopelessness, he remarked in hollow tones, 'I met a senior officer this last week-end, and he anticipates invasion. He doesn't see how on earth we can repel it.'

That was enough for me. A senior officer, if serving, who could tell a civilian that he anticipated an invasion which he did not expect to repel after the navy had sliced it into disorder deserved, I said, to be reduced to the status of batman to the sergeants' mess; and I expressed the hope that this senior officer was so very senior that promotion to the grave was imminent.

Eventually, with this friend, and a very likeable friend he is, I reached the safe position of not discussing the war in its operational sense; but when after August 18th, a highly important date in British, if not world, history, it seemed clear that the R.A.F. could control what was

## FRONT TO BACK

controllable in attack from the air where 'mopping up' after a victory shows signs of being impossible, I felt it safe to call on this friend to rejoice greatly with me. He was very willing; but such was the reproductive power of the chattering pessimism still in him that it felt bound to offer me offspring.

He remarked gloomily, 'Couldn't get any beef to-day' — he was then in charge of the catering of an important club — 'my butcher says they bombed the meat ship at Bristol.'

Obviously, there may seem little in this gossip; but when cross-questioned, it became clear that the butcher had not been really sure about the destruction of the meat vessel. He did not think it had actually occurred at the Bristol docks; it might have been in the great Bristol Channel, and she may have been the victim of a German submarine. But the unconscious object of the pessimism in my friend was to modify the vital hope inherent in the R.A.F. victory; a victory which offered me no less delight because I had anticipated it; and to let me see that German bombers could work awful havoc with our food supplies.

And that, of course, might be useful in helping to control one's exultation, and thus to prevent inevitable set-backs from causing heavy thuds; but the information was inaccurate and unreliable and should not have been handed on.

Incidentally, it being Friday, the day when I collect my meat ration for the week-end, I anticipated difficulty; but my butcher had actually a surplus of beef and was unaware of any shortage.

Some incidents in the foregoing anticipate events which were now shaping in France.

Mr. Churchill had made it clear that weeks, even months, must elapse before our army could be effectively

re-equipped. I confess to some relief when I heard this, for much as I hoped to see the French armies making a stand, I could not contemplate them doing so; and in view of the comparative smallness of our army, even if magically re-equipped, I feared their return immediately to France would only mean further disaster. All that was then inexplicable in the Battle of the Bulge had seriously affected confidence in the French armies.

Yet Britain was bound to do her best to help her ally; considerations of prudence had to be abandoned on a point of honour; all the men we could possibly send, were sent.

Later, when events had marched further and Paris was threatened, André Maurois broadcast to us from London. He had just left Paris and, very pleasantly, he offered a picture of the French capital slowly coming under the Nazi shadow. He was particularly effective when he mentioned a French bricklayer completing a house; but still pleasantly, he unconsciously charged into the realms of the absurd and stupid when, in urging more help for France, he, a trained intelligence, remarked that two or three incompletely-trained divisions would be of more use now than a dozen well-trained divisions in three months' time.

Two or three incompletely-trained divisions would have been as useful in opposing the highly mechanized German armies as sawdust is in building a stout wooden structure. We were eager to help French military resistance, not to fertilize French soil with the blood of our young men.

One evening on my way home from London at this time, I paused at the small town served by our railway station to buy oranges, parking my little car near the kerb of the pavement following the absurdly narrow main street. My idea had been to get out of the car on the off, and driver's side; but this became dangerous, and eventually impossible, when a mighty convoy of Dominion troops

## FRONT TO BACK

came rushing at considerable speed through the town. It seemed endless — troop-carrying trucks, quaint tanks large and small and, eventually, the divisional artillery. I felt in greatest danger when the trucks hauling great six-inch howitzers swept by because the driver of each truck, in swerving to avoid my small car, risked swinging the muzzle of the gun into it before passing on. Whenever I began to open the door to alight, along came another six-inch howitzer, forcing me to shut it rapidly.

I had reached the point of risking entangling my legs in the various gadgets which forbid a passage from the off to the near seat in the low-swung car, and abandon the car to its probable fate, when I saw in the driving mirror a boy coming along the road on a bicycle, fairly well in front of the next howitzer, but not sufficiently advanced to make his passage past my car safe. I decided that he would stop and alight at my rear; but my horror can be imagined when a yard or two short of my car I saw the howitzer combination overtake the cyclist and both sweep forward to pass me. This could not be done.

The truck promptly chewed up the bicycle; but the howitzer, to whom the unfortunate boy's body was in turn offered, showed rare mercy for a gun, and bounced him, stunned but not seriously hurt, into the doorway of a hairdressing saloon owned, queerly enough, by his father.

The result was that the mighty convoy had to halt to discuss the incident with the village cop, and there was a great ado with the signing of military note-books and the taking of evidence with myself as the star witness. Incidentally, when he came to, the boy showed some tenacity in insisting that he had passed my car before being assaulted by the six-inch howitzer; but his evidence was belied by my running board, which was unpleasantly wounded by the cycle.

S U M M E R 1940

The general upshot was that we were all delayed, the convoy and myself; and we made friends. Fine looking lads, all of them; they were making at speed for an embarkation port for France in a great state of pleased excitement which I could not share as I slowly motored home to the farm-house. What could be the fate of these fine Dominion soldiers? How would we in Britain be able to explain satisfactorily to their people at home if what most probably would happen came to pass?

The good B.B.C. broadcast a most enlivening account of the embarkation of, probably, troops which included the convoy I had met. Surely the B.B.C. knew. Surely the editors of the newspapers who wrote so confidently during these days knew, when our courageous oddments were shipped across to France, that French resistance was even now hardly more alive than a snake with its head chopped off. But, thank God, rapidly moving events saved this scratch B.E.F. There was mercy for us in German celerity.

## CHAPTER II

It is by no means certain, I think, that history will give dignity to the second phase of the French 1940 campaign by naming it a battle in the grand sense.

While it would be absurd to deny courage and dash in the brilliantly led victories, it is clear that they were not strong enough to resist the temptation to achieve initial surprises by the use of a treachery and cruelty unparalleled in human history to defeat opponents so badly led, and poorly inspired, by indifferent and, occasionally, miserable self-seeking leadership that good soldiers became human animals, more relentlessly pursued by the desire to live than by the fastest enemy tank.

But whatever the so-called Battle of France was, a rout or merely a pursuit, its loss carried the gravest implications for Great Britain; or so it seemed at the time, although, once again, history may offer a better judgment.

When it was all over, offering a picture of unrelieved tragedy, we were bound to admit that the pain in those few days, while the battle raged, or ran, was considerably softened by French courtesy and tact. News floated across the English Channel with the lightness of thistledown, reaching us in a harmonious lullaby, undrowned by the hoarse bass from 'The Fuehrer's Headquarters'.

Even before the opening of the second phase, obligingly announced by Hitler, the more unpleasant facts in the way of convenient bridgeheads, left in the hands of the enemy along the French defensive line, were slurred over, if not ignored.

And when things began to go badly, which they did at once, the important German success on the extreme left

of the French line was called 'infiltration to the River Bresle'; and the alarming fact, soon clear, that German tanks were charging about in the Rouen area, seemed merely to present the French with the chance to destroy them.

'Advanced elements, after fulfilling their mission against enemy tanks and infantry, fell back in accordance with orders' was a charming way of expressing what apparently happened on these occasions if we accept the evidence of a Polish officer whose evening newspaper articles recorded a conversation he shared in a French officers' hostel after the capitulation. A young French officer, in defending the fame of the British troops, accused by a French medical officer of running away, said that he himself dared not stand fast in the sector he commanded because, with an intimate knowledge of the officers on either side of him, he knew that they would instantly withdraw without orders when German tanks made things lively.

When the Germans failed to cross the Seine during a first attempt, this was offered as heartening news and actually softened the blow in the alarming fact that the enemy had progressed so far.

It is not my purpose to follow the campaign in any detail; but it is difficult to ignore certain aspects which forcibly struck British people. One of these was that no matter how soundly the French were defeated, French communiqués invariably pointed out that the enemy had paid a price for his success apparently out of all proportion to its value. It looked, at times, as if the German invasion of France would eventually become a solitary walking tour enjoyed by Hitler, who would enter Paris alone.

General de Gaulle belatedly emerged at this time as an Under-Secretary to M. Reynaud, and much was said of his undoubted fame as an officer with a full, and apparently

## FRONT TO BACK

unique in the French army, appreciation of mechanized warfare.

Poor M. Reynaud! It is difficult to imagine his condition as he ran about trying to plug the vast and unmanageable rent in the hull of his ship of state with all he could find. Time had made all he could find less useful than a bottle cork. The ship was sinking; but instead of beaching her on the neighbouring coast of Northern Africa where she might be salvaged, M. Reynaud forced the vessel to steam to an inevitable fate.

No mention was made of the energetic stewardess on board; and some of us have often wondered whether she was noted by skippers from British craft who boarded the French vessel to lend a hand to her hard-pressed commander. Madame Hélène de Portes emerged later and resisted all our attempts to push her back into the pages of Balzac.

When Mussolini decided to add his wind to the storm destroying the unhappy French vessel, it became clear that she had little hope of riding out the gale; but few of us imagined that her captain and officers would decide to sink with her while her life-boats, quite capable of making the journey to North Africa, were well-found. Vessels which sink are not necessarily glued to the ocean bed.

If the decision had rested in the hands of the young American university men addressed at this moment by President Roosevelt at his son's graduation, the United States would have instantly declared war on Mussolini when the President cried from his heart, 'The hand that held the dagger has plunged it into the back of his neighbour!' The young Americans, judging from their response to the President's cry, were convinced that there was only one thing to be done with a back-stabbing assassin; but they were alone amidst overwhelming political complications and perplexities, and helpless. Nevertheless, the common British people

heard that clean response over their radios; it was not lost, and will always be remembered.

Mussolini's action infuriated Mr. Duff Cooper; I do not know why. Benito is only a peasant, and is bound to look after himself. Any rat would behave in similar fashion. To honour him with a neatly and incisively constructed tirade of effective abuse, no matter how merited, in a beautifully delivered broadcast seemed a waste of breath, although few of us failed to enjoy it. There was, perhaps, some danger in so frank an appraisement of Caporetto from British official lips hitherto tactful on the Italian rout by the Austrians; and the suggestion that Italy, already famous for ruins, might soon have more to show, was perhaps lacking in originality; but we could all commend as singularly apropos the recalling of a hearty curse issued by Garibaldi on any Italian leader joining in an attack on Great Britain.

Incidentally, it is not recorded that Bismarck threw out a curse on any of his successors on aggression bent mad enough to embroil Britain; but his own careful avoidance of any such preoccupation while Britannia ruled the waves should have indicated the awful penalties inherent in doing so.

There were indications that the French would defend Paris, and while many of us who have enjoyed the beauty of that city foresaw its destruction with deep pain, we felt that the French, who must love their capital more dearly than we do, had no choice. A Paris razed to the ground might be a spiritual monument as high as the heavens; a Paris saved at the expense of French valour and patriotism might remain a sore for ever on the French national body.

However, the French leaders changed their minds when the German pincers movement made a devastating siege inevitable, and having pointed out very clearly that the capital had no importance in their scheme of defence, they proceeded to abandon it, speeding along roads running south

## FRONT' TO BACK

and cast, roads already clogged with an awful mixture of civilians and soldiers, sitting rabbits for the Nazi Knights of the Air.

While it is true that the victories of a big army and a small army fighting at the same time may not synchronize — if they stand fast; it is incontestable that their defeat will be a duet — if they do not.

British ministers were apparently flying to Paris and back while this remained possible, and according to *The Times* Diplomatic Correspondent, they found 'the heart of France unshaken'. Curious that! After the battle, at least one British newspaper correspondent admitted that he foresaw what was about to happen, that he, with other newspaper men, was aware of the fatal weakness in the French Government days, if not weeks, before the end. Apparently, the French censorship prevented the dispatch of information which might have prepared us; still, it is difficult to understand why the French censor was not outwitted on so vital a subject.

Paris fell without many tears; in other ages, at other times, so momentous an event could only have been the climax of a soul-stirring struggle. Apparently the American Ambassador met the invaders some distance from the city with the object of preventing incidents, but between whom was not clear. Low, the cartoonist, brilliantly caught the cheap glitter, and the curiously ridiculous, which seems to accompany all Hitler's successes, despite the pain Hitler inflicts, when he issued a cartoon in an evening paper, 'Here comes the Bride!' In a magnificent car tearing through the Arc de Triomphe driven by a stiff chauffeur beside whom was an equally stiff orderly, the ex-corporal son of the Austrian bastard Schicklegruber sat in all his glory with a grinning fox at his side clad as a bride. The fox, however, could not deny the fun in the cartoon.

It was said in Britain then, 'Hitler will never enter our London while one stone stands on another. Our monuments, all that we love so dearly, will be broken into missiles and flung at him, or ground into mud with our blood before our London soil is defiled by his monstrous presence'.

I confess I did not join in that chorus. I knew then, as I know now, that if Hitler comes to London he will pass through a busy, well-ordered city to his destination — Pentonville, where common murderers are hanged. Anyone in authority who suggests the Tower of London as a prison for Schicklegruber's son will be asked by the British people to join the less worthy shades which haunt that fortress.

After the fall of Paris, it was impossible for us in Britain to see precisely what was happening to the campaign. We became deeply anxious about that portion of the Expeditionary Force which had not advanced with the main army into Belgium and which, we gathered, was fighting in great heart with the retreating French army. That our anxiety was justified became plain when it was announced that six thousand of these fine men were trapped on the French coast after a vain attempt to embark at Valery-en-Caux. Some day we shall have details of their trapping. At the moment it would appear that they were pawns in the game of chess being played by Hitler and General Weygand. I was particularly concerned because an intimate friend, a young Scottish officer, appeared to be one of the six thousand. He had been posted as 'missing'; his family and friends could only hope that he had been captured.

It will serve to illustrate how pessimism spreads its gloomy tentacles if I relate that when I expressed some anxiety to a friend in London with whom I was walking, he urged me to prepare for the worst. 'I don't want to distress you,' he said, 'but I've heard on very good authority that the Germans put that six thousand up against walls and shot the lot.'

## FRONT TO BACK

I stoutly denied this. Undoubtedly the Germans behaved like foul beasts in many ways; but soldierly traditions counted with them, certainly enough to forbid the massacre of six thousand soldiers in cold blood.

But my friend seemed without any doubt on the subject, repeating that he had been given the information on good authority. We parted at a moment when I had bought an early edition of an evening newspaper.

By a strange chance, the paper had printed the story of a soldier who had been one of the unfortunate six thousand and who had escaped two or three days after his capture, making his adventurous way across the channel in a small rowing boat. He said that the prisoners had been treated 'not without consideration', that they had been given the best food available then, and rather better food later; and that the commanding officer had been allowed to retain his car and orderly.

Since then, by a very roundabout way, contact has been made with the Scottish officer, and we can send him some provisions and books. Among other books, I have sent him *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the latter with some point since it is the copy he often used while staying at the farm-house when we acted the Humpty Dumpty passages, he in the star part of Humpty Dumpty which he played with great effect. When he receives these books, if the Nazis do not annex them as highly suspicious, I expect he will enjoy, or suffer, a vision of Martha spreading the table with all the good things, notably beautifully cooked vegetables from the garden, which she knows he likes.

While the situation in France was continuing to deteriorate with awful rapidity, M. Reynaud broadcast an appeal to the American people to come to the aid of France. With the deepest of sympathy for the unhappy man in an extremity the depth of which we could only guess at, it was

easy for us to see the point of view of a Washington spokesman who is reported to have said, 'It is hard to understand precisely what M. Reynaud wants us to do. Only a vote of Congress can declare war'. American resources were already at the disposal of France.

It is probable that the French Cabinet had given M. Reynaud one more chance before voting him out of the premiership. If America promised active aid, France would continue the struggle; if she did not, M. Reynaud must resign.

At this time it was reported in a London paper which gave the short article no prominence, that a Chicago newspaper had published a dispatch to the effect that the American Ambassador to France had warned the President not to commit the country to war with Germany since he had reason to believe that France was preparing to make a separate peace. And although the truth of this was denied in Washington, according to reports reaching London, those of us who saw the short article were convinced that the Chicago newspaper was not seriously mistaken even if it had attempted a guess. Anyway, we in Britain had learnt to expect the first hint of disaster in insignificant little articles with following denials.

To have been of effective help in the French campaign, it would have been necessary for the United States to have declared war on Germany roughly about June 1939 as far as I can judge; and while the moral effect in France might have been excellent had America been able to respond to Reynaud's cry for help, it would not have reduced the speed of the Nazi advance by one kilometre, nor put one raindrop of mercy in the hearts of the Nazi Knights of the Air in their dive bombers.

Truly the Lord helps those who help themselves; under the unwieldy democratic circumstances prevailing in the

## FRONT TO BACK

United States, that country becomes divine in the sense that it dared not, with the best will in the world, risk the lives of millions of its young men to help a France showing so few signs of an heroic will to help herself. Doubtless, the Washington administration's knowledge of political conditions in France was much better than that enjoyed by the British people.

M. Reynaud's dramatic appeal to America was excellently constructed and read well; as a speech delivered by a good actor in a noble tragedy, it must have drawn tears to the most blasé member of the audience; but because it could not possibly have any effect in a realistic world beyond cruelly embarrassing those to whom it was made, it should never have been made. It is just conceivably possible that a short cry, 'Please, America — come and help us!' short and simple because made between shrewd blows aimed at the advancing enemy, might have had effect; but then the failure of such a cry to gain response would have made the embarrassment of American friends of France almost insupportable.

British Ministers were now very busy doing everything possible to bolster up French resistance. This one and that one went flying across the Channel; and it is easy to imagine the unhappy gentlemen sweating blood as they tried to impede Hitler's progress at that critical point, marked by the French fleet, while the thunderous atmosphere at Bordeaux darkened, and Hélène de Portes, like a witch in attendance at a storm, went about muttering with her lips compressed and her face twitching, 'Il faut faire la paix! Peace must be made!'

Our offer to unite with France was a brilliant idea conceived a little late and so obviously, it seemed, aimed at the salving of the French fleet that its initiative value was small. Yet had it been accepted, its motive, natural enough under the circumstances, which had the salvation of France as its

aim as well as our own security, would easily have been forgotten when the scheme reached fruition in a United States of Europe.

Hélène de Portes's alleged retort to the suggestion, 'Then we shall become part of the British Empire!' showed what a very small-minded and stupid woman she must have been. The mere fact that her words might carry any weight at this critical time gives old Marshal Pétain some excuse for desiring to weed the French garden drastically, at any cost to useful herbs, even to clear the earth of everything in the hope of a new growing.

And so M. Reynaud resigned and Marshal Pétain reigned in his stead.

Democratic government in France has one great advantage for the French politicians. A French Prime Minister can wax eloquent in many beautifully constructed phrases, some perhaps meaningless, but all of the stuff of literature; guaranteeing the faith of his country in any crusade; but when the country becomes bored with the crusade, or it appears to demand more than can be readily given, the French Prime Minister resigns, and his successor celebrates his rise to power with another clever speech certain to contain the phrases, 'France's destiny', or 'the soul of France', and charmingly reverses the policy of his predecessor while the band plays *La Marseillaise* and we all talk admiringly of French logic.

I heard the news of the French decision to abandon the struggle when it was first announced by the B.B.C. at one o'clock. I was well aware of what it meant; but it was impossible not to be charmed with the very nice B.B.C. announcer's method of delivering the fateful news. His voice dropped a tone or two, and he might have been a pantomime dame telling of a late husband. The news was expected; we could only be astonished at the pathetic hope

## FRONT TO BACK

in old Marshal Pétain's breast that he, a soldier, hoped to make an honourable peace — with soldiers!

And we could hardly help picturing what would have happened if the boot had been on the other foot, and Hitler with his hordes had been chased beyond Berlin to the neighbourhood of the Polish corridor. What kind of peace could Hitler have expected?

It is unlikely that he would have waited to find out.

### CHAPTER III

WHEN these troublous years are past, and the pain in the world is dead with our dust, an historian blessed with a sense of humour may find much to amuse him if the details of the present days survive. He will not have to claim the indulgence, as I do now, of many of our people who have lost loved ones, or whose near and dear are in daily peril; and who consequently cannot regard the Nazi war with the light-hearted confidence I affect. Still, even they, being British, know the importance of not forgetting how to laugh.

Of course, it is one thing to see the comic side of one's own distresses; but something entirely different, and less worthy, to be amused when others are floundering ridiculously in a slough of despair.

Hence we could not laugh when old Marshal Pétain spoke of making peace with honour 'as between soldiers'.

Soldiers! Soldiers who had rushed into Denmark and Norway while the Danes and the Norse slept! Soldiers hidden in worthy-looking canal barges ready to leap at the throats of innocent neighbours in Holland. Soldiers dropping from the sky in disguises, while soldierly Knights of the Air murdered thirty thousand men, women and children in Rotterdam! Soldiers in tanks charging through refugee-clogged roads in Belgium and squashing the wounded into the earth! Soldiers on the ground, and Knights of the Air who murdered countless thousands of French civilians, now being appealed to by a Marshal of France for an honourable peace!

But there was something distinctly comic about the

## FRONT TO BACK

French general, retired after the Sedan debacle, remarking to a newspaper correspondent in Paris, 'It is ghastly to end one's career in this way!' — comic, of course, through the choice of the schoolgirl's favourite adjective in the translation of what the gentleman said.

The Nazis have not supplied much comedy in their conduct of the war. They showed early promise, however, when, at the close of their reply to our ultimatum, they said, 'The intention, communicated to us by order of the British Government by Mr. King-Hall, of carrying the destruction of the German people even further than was done through the Versailles Treaty is taken note of by us . . .' Excellent publicity for Commander King-Hall, despite the demotion, but positively devastating to the sensibilities of the very serious Britons in the Foreign Office who had not, in a Foreign Office sense, even heard of the mild *enfant terrible*, Commander King-Hall.

Incidentally, I thought Sir Nevile Henderson supplied a touch of unconscious humour when, in reporting his conversation with von Ribbentrop, he allowed us to enjoy with the pair of them a first class row; and when, while listening to an endless tirade by Hitler, he thrust in an occasional correction which, Sir Nevile admits, only had the effect of making the Fuehrer more difficult. Did Sir Nevile Henderson expect these little contradictions would make the spoilt Adolf Hitler, the Dictator of the German Reich, amiable, or even reasonable? Noel Coward, Beverley Nichols, or even Ivor Novello would have changed the conversation to a happy discussion of Hitler's pictures; and risked getting everything they wanted. And this is not meant to be serious criticism of Sir Nevile Henderson's conduct of the negotiations immediately before the outbreak of war. The Nazis had to be fought.

While Hitler is fighting with submarines which offer no

chance to poor sailors, flying his aeroplanes to knock down both pleasant and hideous old buildings on top of women and children, and performing all the tricks he claims to be basicly merciful, in the long run, he is not a bit funny. It is only when he begins playing with trains that he becomes boyish and almost attractive.

It is difficult to imagine the feelings of those Parisians who watched the Nazi soldiers dragging forth from its shrine in Les Invalides the famous Foch railway carriage and, after setting it on the railway lines and doubtless shouting 'Heil Hitler!' sending it off on its journey back to the Forest of Compiègne.

When the train had been carefully placed on that spot in the forest where Marshal Foch met the Germans to discuss armistice terms in 1918; and after Doctor Goebbels had collected enough journalists and photographers, the Nazis staged surely the most amazing comedy history has ever enjoyed, notably when Hitler, now, if ever, 'with his corporal's stripes burning into his arm', sat in Marshal Foch's chair and watched the unhappy Frenchmen bite the dust. What is so amazing is that these silly, and incredibly unpleasant, boys can be so difficult to catch and punish.

It is certain that when they are caught and punished they will show more astonishment than distress no matter how carefully their wickedness is explained to them. Children punished for pulling wings off flies sometimes react in this way. German barbarity and revolting cruelty is conceivably tragically emphasized fly de-winging.

I hope I am not alone in Britain in seeing humour in the sincerely sympathetic way our American friends have thrust us into an 'Island Citadel' which they occasionally call 'The Last Outpost of Freedom against the Nazi Menace'; and I am sure there are others of my countrymen who feel considerable embarrassment when we read of our 'inflexible

## FRONT TO BACK

determination to fight to the bitter end', to say nothing of our 'calm attitude in the face of inconceivable danger'.

The truth is that most of us know that to call the British Empire a very hard nut to crack is gross under-statement even if an ivory nut, the seed of the sago palm, is indicated; something immense and made of solid rubber is nearer the mark, and, anyway, well beyond the power of Nazi 'ersatz' teeth to chew.

This deep sympathy and commiseration makes one feel sorry for the Nazis. They must have a highly unpleasant time in their submarines; and at this moment, while I write these words, the Knights of the Air in their bomber droning in the truly awful gale raging above the farm-house to-night command some sympathy. I expect they will shortly jettison their bombs on a meadow, and go home to bed. Judging by the precautions Martha is taking when the droning becomes particularly insistent, it is evident that she thinks the Knights are after her, personally; but it is no good my urging her not to shelter in the small passage next to the great old chimney which now depends almost entirely on gravity to keep it erect; because she feels safer there, and there is only one chance in two million of the Knights mistaking the farm-house for an orphanage or mental hospital.

While there is not much humour in it, I cannot help seeing something quaint in the amount of time spent by really clever, observant people in writing and talking of our years of sleep before September 1938, our eye-rubbing during 1939 and our failure to be really alert even during much of 1940. There is a cloud of witness against me; the impulse to agree that we were caught napping is very strong indeed.

If all the people in a community go about armed to the teeth against assassins, murderers will exchange their knives

or guns for poison phials; and if everybody decides carefully to test his food and drink before partaking, homicide will become unknown; but it is impossible to imagine such a community really enjoying life or progressing far. It is better to have a good police force and a few prisons, and to risk slaughter on behalf of a moderately comfortable life.

From the moment our ultimatum to Germany expired those German ships which could not dive quickly found themselves redundant on the oceans of the world. The British Navy was not asleep. It was in a very high state of efficiency.

There are some people who would seem to have imagined that the Royal Air Force in September 1939 was as attractive as a flock of barn-door chickens, and as mobile in the air. They ask themselves why the Luftwaffe was not more insistently apparent in the British sky during the first ten months of the war and agree that Hitler and Goering are not fools enough to believe that Britain is a kind of Amen to be sung at the end of a hymn; but they never find a heartening answer to this question.

Mr. Churchill has assured us that it was not from any false feelings of delicacy that the Luftwaffe spared us; nor was it.

During September of this year, 1940, quite a large number of the Nazi aircraft which have gone to swell the immense junk heaps in this country were marked with dates late in 1939 and even 1940. The newspapers pointed out that, owing to their great losses, the Germans were probably forced to use machines of current production.

I expect it will be considered 'complacency' or 'wishful thinking', the latter one of the more deadly phrases produced by the war, if it is suggested that the number of serviceable pre-1939 machines owned by the Germans was only a proportion of what they had ready to use in their war of nerves.

## FRONT TO BACK

There is no limit to aeroplane production when the machines are to be used in a nerve war. You can produce one every second, and double that, if you like, without strain.

And even to-day, when it is perfectly clear that the R.A.F. have soundly defeated the Luftwaffe, numbers of otherwise splendid British people, still soaked with the wet blanket of the late neutrals' fate and the collapse of France, remain very cautious as they say, 'Yes, but if he really decides to come over here with *all* his force . . . !'

I generally reply, 'Well, what do you think he's doing? Tickling us with a feather, to prepare us for the pounce of the eagle?'

I prefer to consider the Luftwaffe beaten. It is a tribute the R.A.F. are too modest to demand.

However, it is not complimentary to the Royal Air Force to suggest that the Luftwaffe is not strong and highly efficient, or to doubt the courage of Nazi airmen. But even in September 1939 the R.A.F. was a very long way from being a flock of chickens. Then it was, as it is now, the most powerful air force in the world.

'Nonsense!' I can hear more than one say.

I can only retort, 'By their deeds ye shall know them!'

For years and years, the R.A.F. has been drawing the élite from the British Empire for its airmen; and while the Empire can offer every conceivable specimen of flora, the Royal Air Force are not concerned with either botany or horticulture!

It is true that after 1918 we permitted other nations to have greater fleets of aircraft than our own; but those who had nursed the R.F.C. into the R.A.F. were not fools, and although a naturally peaceful community put a limit on quantity, no objection was offered to developing superb quality. When the R.A.F. began knocking down Nazi aircraft in unbelievable numbers, Air-Marshal Joubert in a

broadcast met the scepticism of many Denmark-Norway-Holland-Belgium-France-disillusioned British people by expressing surprise at their surprise that the R.A.F. were cutting through the Luftwaffe like a knife through hot butter.

The British Navy has never been asleep; the Royal Air Force has, perhaps, been a little slim in its history; but it has always been wiry, and was not yawning in 1939.

And, if it be true that we were sleeping before this war, would a much earlier awakening have put the Nazis to bed? Or might it not have enlivened them to more violent efforts? There would have been an armaments race with a logical conclusion delayed, perhaps, but inevitable. At this moment, it would be of great advantage to us if our fleet were double its size, and our air force were multiplied by four; particularly if our enemy's strength remained as it is now. But if we had had an army of at least a million in Belgium, is it quite certain that the French would have stood fast at Sedan?

Surely the truth is that we believed our navy could guard our coasts and Empire, that the Royal Air Force could defend our skies; and that while we built up an army, the French would at least hold an enemy.

And we had had Lady Houston, at whom we all laughed. Many people may recall her letter to the then Prime Minister in which she said, if I am not mistaken, when offering to finance the last Schneider Cup, that something had to be done about the 'hordes preparing in the East to overwhelm the British Empire'.

I recall one superior journal picking up this phrase and calling it rubbish. And, of course, there was something comic about Assyrians coming down like wolves on the British fold, or Tartars sharpening their scimitars to slice off Anglo-Saxon heads. But the hordes have come from the East and, thank God, Lady Houston so early in the day opened and completed the first Spitfire fund.

## FRONT TO BACK

On the whole, is it not kind to suggest that if British leaders during the past twenty years had known as much as we know now they would have been equally wise? Or would their wisdom have been divine, and rather disconcerting in this world?

This is not meant to be a defence of past complacency, or past neglect; to put it vulgarly, Germany has been a pain in the back of Europe's neck for generations, a boil which, to lance too early, was to invite greater trouble. The boil had to come to a head. Perhaps our leaders were wrong in diagnosing a mere pimple; boils and pimples begin very much the same.

However, after the French in France had completely collapsed and when the French governors and military leaders in the more tactically important French colonies had raised our hopes in one or two dramatic statements, without doing very much more about it; and when we had saved from the wreck all that could be saved in men and equipment, we were left to face the Nazis alone.

The prospect looked terrible; but read very much worse in the reports from sympathetic American correspondents which were duly reprinted in our newspapers which, themselves, also appear to enjoy pulling out the *vox humana* stop occasionally. Evidently our friends in the United States were already buying mourning weeds for our funeral to which, incidentally, Hitler had invited us, eventually making a shocking mess in our meadows and village streets with a shower of invitation pamphlets to be followed, we guessed, with something much more pressing if we refused.

Yet we refused, on account of a 'subsequent' engagement; without abandoning all hope of future contacts, information we continue to offer assiduously in packets, sent by air mail.

The story of the hasty evacuation of our bits and pieces of army and equipment from toppling France may not have

the quality of an epic; but when the story is told in full, if it ever is, it should make exciting reading. The preoccupation of our allies in their own wreck must have made our salvaging operations in the French ports extremely confusing. The French had apparently no idea whether they were coming or going; but the increasing attention of Nazi bombers and submarines, and the uncertainty about the speed of the German advance, left us in no doubt about the advisability of our marching on England with the utmost celerity.

We suffered severe losses, as was inevitable; but a touch of fun rose to the menacing surface when a seriously overladen tug, which had rescued many more than she could safely carry from a sinking transport, was beautifully photographed and reproduced in our papers.

Some of the Tommies who had taken to the water had wisely abandoned all their clothing, and two or three snowy white figures, goodly-proportioned nudes they were too, appeared like well-posed statues in the drab woodland of hundreds of clothed soldiers apparently delighted with the attention of the photographer. One nude was quite modestly poised on the rope ladder leading to the decks of a bigger vessel alongside.

A popular illustrated morning newspaper saw no need to retouch; a good, steady morning paper which costs a penny and is worth more, gave the nude a towel to hold in one hand; but the London *Times*, which costs two pence, clothed him in a well-tailored pair of shorts. None of them, however, could succeed in modifying the backward glance of deep embarrassment which the nude was evidently directing towards the camera in his haste to reach the shelter of the deck above him.



P A R T   F I V E

A U T U M N   1940



## CHAPTER I

HITLER's European campaign, which had entailed the defeat of armies numbering millions, and the subjugation of much of Europe, had worked with clock-like precision. It had been as if he had remarked to friends in Berlin before starting off on a short Continental motoring tour on May 10th, 'We shall be wandering here and there; but letters and telegrams will reach us at Paris on June 15th, possibly a day or two earlier'.

Now he was faced with the choice of two alternatives; to divide his party somewhat, to ship the cars from the Channel ports and to end the summer's jaunt with a tour of the British Isles; or to extend the journey considerably by motoring quickly down through Spain to Gibraltar with the idea of crossing to the northern coast of Africa and eventually catching up with Italian friends dawdling their way in the direction of Egypt. If the British tour were chosen, letters would reach the tourist on August 15th, addressed care of Buckingham Palace.

The mere possibility of receiving so important a guest had turned the British Isles into a hive of activity, and the most exquisite arrangements were made for his reception on the mere chance of his deciding to honour the British people with a visit.

The British people were not long in doubt. Apparently deciding that apart from its great cost, the tour of Spain and Africa would take more time than he could willingly spare, Hitler decided to see Britain first, and to give his Italian friends an opportunity to tell him all about the Pyramids when they met at the celebration arranged for the autumn.

All the world had followed the Hitlerian progress with

## FRONT' TO BACK

deep interest, and because tours which begin well and continue without accident almost invariably end with equal smoothness, few people doubted but what the German and Italian dictators would enjoy at least one jolly day together before all the leaves had fallen from the trees of Europe.

Amongst the few doubters in the world were the people of the British Empire and, in particular, the British people who live in Britain. Noting the implications in the proposed Axis celebration, they, well aware that their first movements might be halting, proposed to take every possible step to arrange for its postponement and eventual cancellation.

The renewed journey, they saw, must now be made alone, and towards the close of a day marked by disasters; nor had the menacing sunset presaged less than a succession of storms throughout the coming night, with a promise of thunder and lightning, to say nothing of fire-balls, on the thorn-encrusted way.

While it is true that the British band had every intention of marching through this night of doubt and sorrow to the promised land of security and peace, it would not be entirely correct to say that all the pilgrims were inspired with the same quality of hope. Some, indeed, had been very frightened, and all were deeply anxious. They knew, too, that not all now bearing the cross of high endeavour would rest beneath its shade when the sun again shone on a cleansed world.

The invasion scare cast its shadow over Britain from the moment when all useful ports on the European coast, from Narvik to the Spanish frontier, had fallen into the hands of our enemy. Invasion became the main theme in nearly all statements made by the Prime Minister; it coloured with rather a sombre hue the courageous broadcasts offered by many leaders, and dyed the editorial pages most days in nearly all the newspapers. The often fearfully asked question, 'Well,

when do you think he's coming over here?' very naturally sprung to the lips of many.

I was bound to admit the urgency of taking every conceivable precaution against invasion, including one which seems to have been missed — an attitude of unconcern; but although I could see that our plainly anxious leaders had all available information while I had none which might be called fresh, I proposed to have a good look round, when I came up for the second time, to see what chances there were of rescue and, if I should find none, to stick my feet well down and thus to escape drowning in what might be shallow water. History is not uncrowded with great leaders who have been mistaken.

I decided to look invasion in the face and to picture its probable progress.

The R.A.F. could harass, but not prevent, the concentration of armies of victory-flushed Nazis in the Channel port areas. The enemy had shipping available, including an adequate supply of barges from the countless navigable rivers and canals of the vast chunk of Europe he controlled. The barges would float on water shallow enough for disembarkation during high tides, but larger transports would demand harbours and docking facilities if the troops they carried were to be landed without prolonged and fatal pauses. I felt I could dismiss the rumour that German ships had been given veranda-like bows which would permit the main hull to float in deep water while the soldiers stepped ashore from the sharp end. English beaches are not suitable for anything but a grotesque application of such a plan. I decided that the average speed of the barge armada would be, at the best, five knots; therefore the journey across the channel at its narrowest would occupy between four and five hours.

It was said in some newspapers that the barges Hitler would use had a speed as great as fifteen knots; but this

## FRONT TO BACK

seemed open to question. I could admit the probability of the Dutch owning sea-going barges of excellent speed; but for the most part, such vessels are designed chiefly for the carriage of cargo along rivers and canals with vulnerable banks and revetments. There had never been any reason for giving them the speed and lines of a liner that I could imagine. Fast towing could be dismissed. Without the flare to produce a curling bow-wave, barges would swamp if dragged too powerfully. Improvisations occupying less time than a year might make the passage of a few thousand soldiers fast enough; but more than a few thousand would be required for anything but a raid.

Artillery, including guns of great calibre, placed on the French coast might cover the first miles of the journey; but would decrease in accuracy and effect as it progressed. Mines could be placed to form a lane safe from submarine and light naval attack; but any extension to a great distance could not be depended upon while there were British mine-sweepers in the area.

The Luftwaffe dive bombers with protecting fighter planes would be concerned in dealing with British surface craft and the R.A.F.

The spearhead of the expedition would be immensely strong in armoured vehicles and artillery since infantry, unaided, could not storm the British forward positions through thickets of wire. Here the dive-bombers would be of service.

German thoroughness and organizing genius would guarantee a good start, but would not be able to prevent British reconnaissance from detecting it within at most two hours.

If the sea had behaved with the docility of the average German, if the majority of the barges had managed to maintain contact and formation in the darkness and had not begun

to charge into each other with spreading disorganization and swampings, if powerful tow-ropes had all held and not unaccountably parted, a habit they have; the still well-organized armada would eventually meet the navy and the R.A.F. about half way across the Channel.

Once the British naval light craft had escaped the attention of the Luftwaffe, most probably pre-occupied with Spitfires and Hurricanes, they would gain immunity from air attack when they were closely engaging the barges. In the darkness, the field of fire from the barges would be limited and fraught with danger to themselves. The use of searchlights might merely pin-prick targets for British bombers. Bigger British naval craft would now come into action to add to the expedition's troubles.

Soon, what was left of the armada would be within range of all types of British artillery, still able to put down a powerful barrage despite inevitable casualties produced by the intensive bombardment from the French coast. Mobile batteries, withdrawn during the hostile barrage, would return to commanding positions.

The armada, if it had not decided to call it a night by this time, would find its numbers further reduced in the mine-fields; and eventually the sentries on the English coast would hear shouts of 'Kamarad, pardon!' from Teuton lips and not many cracks from Nazi guns.

I could not easily accept the possibility of the attempted invasion being made in clear daylight. I felt I could safely leave invasion from more distant enemy-held ports in the capable hands of the Royal Navy. Without the aid of subversive elements in this country an air-borne invasion had, I felt confident, no chance of success; notably when the defensive precautions against it had been perfected.

There remained the question of some secret device which might abort all our plans. If Hitler possessed some secret

## FRONT TO BACK

device which would abort all our plans of defence, we should be invaded and overwhelmed; and it would be 'just too bad'; but I saw no necessity to anticipate this, or to give it serious consideration.

My reasoning was based on the premise that the British Royal Navy holds command of the sea, and that the Royal Air Force can at least effectively dispute any command of the air claimed by the enemy. To prevent an invasion of Great Britain being most certainly a major disaster, Germany must have at least temporary and local command of the sea in the Channel and decisive command of the air above it. She had neither; until she gained both I was convinced that invasion would not be seriously attempted.

Hitler, as always, would search diligently for a flank; and while he was searching and probing, his staff would concern themselves with organizing an invasion. The scheme might never be applied; but as a demonstration it would help Italy and immobilize a British army and, in doing this, it had immense military value. And if the Fuehrer, with his genius, discovered a flank, the transport of a great army across the Channel, even without opposition, demanded thorough organization.

Gulliver was safe from his Brobdingnag mistress's cat (three times larger than an ox) because, as he says, 'As I have always been told, and found true by my experience in my travels, that flying or discovering fear, before a fierce animal, is a certain way to make it pursue or attack you, so I resolved, in this dangerous juncture, to show no manner of concern'.

I wonder if the savage beast crouching on the French coast would have shown less interest in invading us if we, while never neglecting our preparations, nor relaxing our vigilance, had shown no manner of concern. It would be nice to believe that our show of concern was designed to

keep Hitler away from the much more vulnerable Mediterranean; but it has apparently had that effect and may prove useful.

I suppose a clout on the jaw will be a fitting reply to anyone bold enough to remark, after the war, and when our chests are still thrown out as the sole champions of liberty in the world, that, in view of our great strength, our geographical position and command of the world's resources, it would have been surprising had we failed. I expect many people would think the punishment rather drastic, even for tactlessness.

Having decided to regard invasion as literally a scare, I felt it my duty to cheer those around me who naturally regarded it with deep foreboding since its very possibility suggested a weakening in our main line of defence, the Royal Navy. People knew that the navy could not guarantee immunity from raids; but full-scale invasion was another matter.

Not being privileged to fight any concrete enemy, I now began to attack invasion fear with all my strength, and with so little tact, that some of those I sought to comfort, or convince, often became quite cross almost to the point of demanding an invasion to prove me wrong. Broadcasts and parliamentary statements, invariably harping on the invasion theme, filled me with impatience, not to say fury, and while this might be diagnosed as a symptom of war neurosis and only pardoned on that score, I think a little human fury was well justified when directed towards those who, in speaking and writing, destroyed so much well-directed and well-intentioned force by encrusting their thoughts with hoary old barnacles in the way of fateful clichés.

We soon came to regard the dank picture of ourselves 'fighting to the bitter end' with revulsion; and standing with our 'backs to the wall' as only less tedious and uncomfortable

## FRONT TO BACK

than being in 'the last ditch'. Eventually, I found myself with an ally in a Socialist Minister who suggested that 'when we win' was a much more useful phrase than 'if we win'.

I hoped, then, that this politely proffered advice would fly across the Atlantic, to the British Embassy at Washington. The good Ambassador there, with the very best of intentions in his talks to the American people, had more than once permitted himself to use the conjunction 'if'. The conjunction is a tiny little word which takes up no space, but in the vast British Empire to-day there is no room for it.

Of course, the British people are strong enough to digest the surest kind of truth; we 'can take it'; but should we be asked to prepare for awful things too noisily or very often? That noise and rather vain repetition is divine music to the enemy, and why should the medicine sour to our taste do him good?

Late in June there came word from the War Office, and hardly more than one word, telling of a raid we had made on the French coast. It had been highly successful and carried out without loss. We had, so the neat little communiqué said, collected valuable information and some German corpses.

The effect in the train going home that evening was amazing. Men who would never dream of opening their mouths to strangers who had travelled in the same carriage with them for years became quite friendly as this faint hint of a resurgence of the offensive in our forces was discussed. I ate my dinner with a heart lighter than it had been for many weeks, and looked forward to the nine o'clock news with some excitement when, I expected, more would be told.

No more was divulged, but that did not matter.

Unhappily, that night was chosen by Mr. Anthony

Eden to broadcast a very fine speech, packed with good advice and nobly delivered. Admittedly, I caught a vague picture of a handsome David Copperfield addressing forty million Doras in Britain, and deeply interesting many more million Dickens lovers in the United States; but the broadcast showed a fine man, deeply aware of his heavy responsibility in not only building up an army capable of dealing with Hitler, but also in preparing the forces in Britain, military and civil, to meet a clever and unscrupulous invader.

I do not know what the effect on others was, probably negative, for most people switch off at the end of the news proper unless a serving officer in the forces, always excellent, or Mr. Priestley, perfect, is going to talk; but in losing the joy in the neat little communiqué about the raid on the French coast I felt, as I listened to Mr. Eden's deeply earnest tones, less like Dora being talked to by David, and more like a mome rath of Looking Glass Land unable to outgrieve, unable to utter its natural cry, something between bellowing and whistling with a kind of sneeze in the middle.

I have since read this excellent broadcast in *The Listener*, and now find it wholly admirable; for this I thank God and the R.A.F.

Rather later, Miss Dorothy Thompson broadcast to the Canadian women and this talk so impressed the B.B.C., and so delighted many people in this country who admire that lady, as I do, and appreciate her warm friendship for Britain, that we were given at least one encore. I felt transitory hate for Miss Thompson when she apostrophized 'Mr.' Hitler and asked him not to contemplate his own defeat with horror, but rather to regard his own conquest of the British Empire with deep distaste. I do not think, however, that she convinced him of the advisability of not laughing like Little Audrey if he did win.

## FRONT TO BACK

In a later broadcast, and a very fine one too, now addressed to the British people, Miss Thompson pointed out the deadly things Hitler and his kind had done to words. She mentioned 'stink words' which I secretly thought good; but my weak literary foundations were shaken to their depths when the *Times Literary Supplement*, far from holding its pure literary nose, quoted her with warm and dignified approval.

Some curious things are achieved by men of high literary attainment in days of strain and crisis.

Mr. Duff Cooper is invariably inspiriting over the air. His attractive microphone presence and his clear, slightly husky, incisive voice, often convey sympathy and inspire hope. One evening during the very dark days, he began by telling us that we had our backs to the wall and then, almost in one sentence, turned the wall into an ocean, mixing his image with great success, before going on to recite that fine passage from Macaulay's 'The Armada', which pictures the rapid spread of 'fire over England'.

We knew the beginning and the undoubted end of Philip of Spain's expedition against us; therefore the effect as of energy and the offensive spirit was not modified when it sounded just a little as if Mr. Duff Cooper had picked up a Bradshaw timetable and was choosing the railway stations with most music in their names as, with gathering speed and dramatic fire, he recited off the long list of beacon hills as they were lighted.

The recitation deserved a better fate than it met when an old farmer at the village inn said that the way Mr. Duff Cooper gave 'The Wreck of the *Hesperus*' was indeed a treat!

## CHAPTER II

AFTER I had decided not to have an invasion, I found myself one of a very small minority with an impressive majority holding contrary views which ranged from possibility, through probability, to certainty. The majority, apparently, could boast all members of the British Government, all British senior serving officers, many intelligent American friends of Britain, Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, Mussolini, Ciano, Signor Gayda, 'always considered to be Mussolini's mouthpiece' (it is a wonder sub-editors do not strike out that little explanatory note, because we all know it now), the Japanese and M. Pierre Laval.

The most malign result which I could detect appeared in the shop-keepers in our Bloomsbury area. The butcher in Tottenham Court Road who serves me my weekly ration of meat was a glowing exception. He had no time for an invasion, and his daughter, a fine figure of a woman who sits in a glass case and takes the cash, and his two sons who hack up the joints, were in hearty agreement with him. Hence, if the ration had been increased, we should not only have had more beef, but also even more cheer.

But the elderly, rather harassed spinster who serves in the little grocery shop around the corner, the people in the tobacco shop near by, and the man who manages the more superior grocery a block or two distant, all required cheering up. A short heartening lecture on the situation, largely based on command of the sea, and including some mention of Hitler's glittering successes as demonstrations of weakness since they were all founded on treachery, invariably succeeded in making dull eyes glow with confidence. The

## FRONT TO BACK

trouble was that a few hours later, or at the most a day later, the gloomy symptoms had reappeared; and I would have to start all over again. The job gave me a feeling of importance as of being useful in the community; but I felt I might sacrifice this pleasure if my patients, or victims, *remained* cheerful.

Fortunately, I was able to isolate the germ, and soon, helped by the R.A.F., I enjoyed effecting something like a permanent cure. I discovered that these shop-keepers were exposed to a morale battering from their customers. All the talk about invasion, superimposed upon the series of shocks we had suffered from the time of the Norway withdrawal until the French collapse, had reduced many of the people of this neighbourhood to the point when they could only groan when they went to buy their provisions and tobacco, 'Well, when do you think he's comin' over 'ere?' following this up with remarks like, 'He said he would be in Paris for lunch on June 15th, and he was. He says he's going to sleep in Buckingham Palace on August 15th and — well, I dunno!'

I suggested to the shop-keepers that a satirically expressed reply to the question might be made and followed up with words of confidence. 'He's coming over here, all right, to Pentonville — to be hanged. Who commands the seas? Haven't we got a navy? If he could sink all our ships some of his Jerries might escape drowning to be shot as they tried to wade ashore from their barges. But he can't sink our ships, although he's tried hard enough. No, we'll get him, all right.'

We then discovered that the gloomy question asked by the customers was actually a bait thrown out by anxious souls in the hope of catching a fish of comfort. They sincerely wanted to be violently contradicted and cheered.

The tobacconist in particular, a very pleasant and highly

intelligent Greek, assured me that the plan worked like magic; and the manager of the superior grocery had equal success. The harassed spinster at the little grocery shop around the corner has always been so harassed, though not a bit unhappy, that it was difficult to detect much effect. However, the vicious circle was broken.

I am anticipating by remarking that I could have attained even better results by immediately dropping high explosive bombs and incendiaries near the Greek's shop and smashing his plate glass, by dropping a land mine near the little shop around the corner and wrecking its front, and by setting fire to half of the superior grocery and smashing all its plate glass windows except one. The Nazi Knights of the Air have since done this to these military objectives, and the general result is a resurgence of gaiety, not to say hilarity, together with an alarming development of creative literary art in the composing of comic signs.

On the Home Front, I found all attempts at cheer-leading abortive. Martha is happily wedded to gloom, and a divorce might have results like the splitting of an atom. At that time she was waiting patiently for bombers to bomb; and now that they are bombing, she is fearfully interested. The first bomb we enjoyed at the farm-house fell more than a mile away; but the old house rocked and shook with the concussion, alarming me considerably. Before I had quite recovered poise — this happened some hours after midnight — I heard Martha fairly tumbling down her staircase before she came whispering hoarsely outside my bedroom door, 'Is that the kind you throw dirt on, sir?' It was an excellent antidote to fear. My bed shook more than the farm-house had.

To return to those days of anxious waiting immediately after the French collapse; it seemed to me that it would be natural enough if the British people felt considerable resent-

## FRONT TO BACK

ment when they realized that the French collapse had exposed them to considerable danger. But except from those people, quite few, who had never had a high opinion of our French ally, I heard no hostile criticism. British people can gossip with as little thought and justice as other peoples; but on the subject of the French capitulation there was a curious reserve. I think we ordinary people in England felt that our neighbours in France had been betrayed by weak leadership; and I do not think it untrue, or unjust, to suggest that, despite a sincere liking for Mr. Churchill, our own faith in leadership generally, even in our own country, required strengthening.

We were all anxious about the fate of the French fleet, and when that difficult question had been at least partially answered, we felt we might call quits with unhappy France. And we could hardly say that France had left us entirely in the lurch when there still remained so many French soldiers and sailors in Britain still eager to fight for the common cause.

In choosing Admiral Somerville to deal with the French squadron at Oran, the Admiralty could not have made a better choice as far as we were concerned. Few of us will forget his broadcast immediately before Dunkirk, when he told us about the Men of Calais. He gave us strength that night when we were full of fear; and perhaps we may still thank him when we find that the very worst the enemy can do to us leaves us nearly always quite unperturbed and only rather 'jittery' during the whistle, and when it bursts!

The fact that Admiral Somerville's squadron, with a very cold eye in the direction of Italy, was able to carry out the obnoxious mission at Oran in so expert a fashion only strengthened our faith, if that is possible, in our sailors.

The attitude of the soldiers who fought in Belgium with the French armies shows few signs of contempt or dis-

pleasure, judging from what I have been told. One smart young Territorial I know had a very low opinion of French military turn-out which he thought untidy and unsoldierly; but even he spoke with the utmost fairness when telling me about an engagement with the Germans he had thoroughly enjoyed, while it lasted.

He had assisted his C.O. in controlling an artillery barrage, watching with great excitement the inevitable failure of the Nazi hordes to live through it. The attempt had been abandoned.

'Then,' I asked, 'why did you retire?'

'Oh,' said he, 'they concentrated on the French Moroccans on our left; they retired, exposed our flank, and so we had to follow them.'

'But,' he added, possibly noting my slight smile of contempt which, as a matter of fact, I felt had been called for; 'they gave the Moroccans ten times more than they gave us.'

Perhaps there was a touch of inconsistency in his next remark — 'The Germans will never face the British if there is any possible way round.'

Upon another occasion I heard a civilian express contempt for the French at a moment when an Army Service Corps corporal stood near.

'Well,' said the corporal, 'I don't know much about it; but I know that when we were struggling through into the town of Dunkirk, I saw the French holding back the Jerries to let us get through. We had a chance, but those Frenchmen — well, Gawd knows what happened to them!'

Harold, an ex-Welsh miner, who had charmed his way into excellent employment as an electrical linesman with the Bucks County Council, work he then knew nothing about but which he now does with great success, and who entered our inn society with no more difficulty than opening the tap-

## FRONT TO BACK

room door, a rare exception in Bucks, spoke of the French disaster with tears in his voice.

'I haven't been on my knees since I gave up chapel when I was a boy; but on the day that they asked us to pray for France, I went down on my knees, and prayed for France. Yes,' repeated Harold in tones loud enough for all in the tap-room to hear, and giving the word France a Celtic caress, 'I went down on my knees to pray for France.'

Harold was so very serious about this unique supplication that I dared not regret what appeared to be a spiritual setback, notably when he went on to express confidence that France would be all right, in the end; and come out on top — 'with us'.

He went on to offer an assurance that the collapse was really a very good thing.

'Better to park her, for the time being,' he said, 'since she seemed pretty weak, and we would have had to hold her up for years, losing millions of men, instead of getting on with the job of beating the Jerrics. We had our boots nailed to the soul of France,' continued Harold, meaning, perhaps, the soil of France; 'and now we can begin marching.'

After a short pause, during which he apparently abandoned France and the French, and concentrated all his attention on our struggle alone, Harold gave the company a glance of fierce defiance as he uttered these memorable words:

'I thinks we be sittin' pretty!'

### CHAPTER III

A LITTLE after six on the evening of August 31st, 1939, I had gone into the bar of the Bloomsbury local for the evening glass of mild and bitter. A man I had known for some years as a six o'clock, mild and bitter acquaintance, a pleasant, genial fellow of middle age whom I imagined to be a moderately prosperous business man, was there as usual with his usual friend; but evidently in an unusual temper. While not a bit cross with his friend, he was laying down the law in a most aggressive fashion and becoming quite red in the face about it.

'What's bitten you?' I asked.

Laying his friend aside for a moment, he turned to me. Always a fellow of quick, impatient understanding, he endeavoured to put his complaint into a nutshell — not that he wanted to tell me, or that he thought I wanted to know; it was merely that he felt the local air should be cleared before he could continue.

'You didn't know,' he began; 'but I am the managing director of one of the bigger East End cemeteries; and the Government have asked me to get ready within two days —' He mentioned a vast number of graves, some thousands, actually — and —. He very incisively propounded some argument he had had with the government department concerned which I failed to comprehend. Finally he said with confident irritation: 'Oh, we can do it, all right; it's only that these blank fools expect . . .' I've forgotten, if I ever understood, the difficulty.

The recalling of the incident these days, when London is being bombed during nearly all hours of darkness and when the daylight sky can afford good cloud cover for the Knights

## FRONT TO BACK

of the Air, has no importance beyond the fact that I was chiefly interested to hear that the six o'clock, mild-and bitter acquaintance ran a cemetery, and not surprised to learn the vast number of graves he had been ordered to make ready in one district. Like everybody else in London, I anticipated a holocaust within hours of the opening of hostilities.

When we said good night to each other in the old Bloomsbury Street house on the evening of September 1st, 1939, the other members of the staff agreed with me in thinking that our reunion after the week-end would be unlike any other Monday morning we had known. That we would recommence our duties normally, without outside interruption, seemed unthinkable. We thought it unlikely that our office, so near the centre of London, would survive many hours of the blitzkrieg.

We could imagine no complete alphabet; we were certain of a short and sharp A.B.C. — A. for the appearance of all the aircraft the Nazis had; B. for a blasting blitzkrieg of an unheard of kind; and C. for the concluding chapter of London's long history as the political and commercial centre of the Empire.

As I walked to Tottenham Court Road to catch the bus for Marylebone that evening, occasionally cocking my eye towards the sky where the sudden appearance of vast numbers of hostile aircraft would not have surprised me — formal war declarations are not done by aggressor nations — my heart felt stout and strong; but there must have been some reflexes somewhere in my sub-consciousness judging from a vague weakness I felt in the knees.

And yet, much to our surprise, we met in the office very much as usual that Monday, and as the days, weeks and months passed, we gradually gave air raids no thought whatever. The R.A.F. grew in strength and eventually we became convinced that our own airmen were capable of defending

London during daylight. The Knights of the Air attempted to attack the navy at odd times, but enjoyed more success with defenceless trawlers and light-ships. Throughout the winter they were not apparent in any force, even in France where, it seemed, the Allies enjoyed something like local superiority.

When I came to live in London for the winter, I began by showing much care in the arrangement of a dressing-gown, slippers and an electric torch in my bedroom, so that I might fly for the basement shelter the moment the alarm sounded; but after a week or two, even these slight precautions were abandoned. With others, I came to the conclusion that London had every chance of remaining the safest place in the country throughout the war.

'If he bombs London,' we began saying, 'the R.A.F. will instantly bomb Berlin. The Huns will not like that!'

While it is impossible even to approach certainty, perhaps a good guess is that London owes her immunity from attack to Hitler's decision to protect Germany. Well aware that Great Britain would not willingly risk harming a hair on the head of a German civilian unless driven to take counter-measures, Hitler carefully avoided any form of air attack which might endanger the lives of non-combatants in Great Britain and France; and in this simple way, saved the oil accumulations, the war industries, the communications and the German people his Luftwaffe was not yet strong enough to defend.

If the Allies had been able instantly to implement their guarantee to unhappy Poland, to have made swift and full-hearted war with the best they had at the time, they might have caught Hitler at a fatal moment and enjoyed the fruits of a blitzkrieg themselves. At the worst, they would have learnt some important lessons; and the fast coming winter might have given them time to apply the lessons. The French,

## FRONT TO BACK

as it turned out, were actually defeated when, instead of attacking the Siegfried Line in full force, they fumbled about with patrols and lost a hundred or two men, a small deposit paid on account of the two million odd prisoners and dead they were to sacrifice later. Ganielin failed to do his simple duty by Poland, and France has paid for the lapse.

There is some hint in Otto Strasser's book *Hitler and I* that Hitler, with uncanny insight, had read his French much better than our leaders had done.

It seems that when the German military attaché from Paris saw Hitler towards the middle of 1938, he reported that the French General Staff was of a high standard, officers and N.C.O.s excellent and the *matériel*, particularly the motorized divisions, first class. The French army of 1937 was superior to that of 1917.

Hitler retorted that according to his reports there was neither courage nor initiative in the French army which was riddled with Bolshevism. Mobilization would present difficulties and when completed, in the first battle the men would shoot their officers rather than the enemy.

This incident suggests that Herr Strasser's reading of Hitler's character may not be altogether dependable in some details, notably the more vital.

Incidentally, Mr. Douglas Reed, whose well-written books have acted like tornadoes on the sensibilities of many in Britain, rousing them to a sense of all the things others have left undone, now seems well-pleased with his countrymen, and writes most encouragingly in a Sunday newspaper. I, like many others, remain grateful to him for the heartening effect of his articles, but not convinced that his favourite for the German Stakes, Herr Strasser, is not, judging from his own book, just another kind of Jerry of the better class.

When air attack in force on Britain was in its stride, we soon had every reason to be encouraged. If the Luftwaffe

sent a large number of machines to attack south and south-east coast ports, and aerodromes, they lost a large number; if they sent a few, they only lost a few; and when they sent a great armada of aircraft, they lost incredible numbers. The business became mathematical. Once or twice, they varied the attack by offering some attention to the north-east coast; but the answer given by the R.A.F. was always of the same precise kind.

My own impression is that the primary object of the Luftwaffe was to engage the R.A.F. with the hope of grounding it; attacks on ports and aerodromes were of secondary consideration, although important. Following the first overwhelming defeat or two, I expected the Nazis to quit or at least to abandon mass attacks; but after intervals of roughly a week, they, with amazing doggedness, would begin again, maintaining pressure for from six to ten days and then coming down on the R.A.F. with a final, mighty attack. The answer remained the same; the Luftwaffe lost three machines to our one, and a much bigger proportion in trained men.

Eventually, on August 8th, an attack began which continued until the 18th. The Luftwaffe lost sixty machines that we know of on the 8th, and if the R.A.F. pilots' alleged estimate that we may count on about half as many again is correct, they began badly, because our losses were only sixteen machines and thirteen pilots. With a grand gesture, the cost of these lost machines was instantly made good by Mr. Garfield Weston, M.P., whose generosity filled every Briton's heart with envy and probably emptied many thin purses to the advantage of Spitfire funds throughout the land. Mr. Garfield said that he regretted he could not replace the lost pilots. We were with him there.

August 9th was a fairly quiet day in the British air; but we heard on this date that the Italians in Libya had suffered with the Luftwaffe on the 8th, losing fifteen machines.

## FRONT TO BACK

On August 11th the Luftwaffe renewed the attack and lost sixty-two bombers and fighters, and the navy accounted for five more. On August 12th, a mere thirty-nine Luftwaffe machines hit either the Channel or the land of Britain with a resounding thud; but on August 13th, they doubled the number and made a record of seventy-eight. The following day was rather quiet, and only thirty-one marched into England and stopped short never to go again. However, the Luftwaffe made up for this on the fifteenth by sacrificing one hundred and eighty machines. On the sixteenth the numbers dropped a little, but remained respectable; seventy-five were destroyed. On the seventeenth, it looked as if the Luftwaffe had decided to call it a day; but on the eighteenth, they made one final attempt with six hundred machines, and left one hundred and forty-four with us.

Our losses varied, but remained in the region of from three to four to one; and a good proportion of our pilots were saved.

During this famous battle, not yet given the significance it deserves, enemy attempts were made to destroy aerodromes and ports on the south and south-east coasts; but no aerodromes were out of action for long, and the value of the ports was not seriously affected.

I thought on August 19th, as I still think, that the R.A.F. clearly, and finally, demonstrated their complete superiority over the Luftwaffe; and that, therefore, the most critical days of the present war had passed. I have to admit that war can offer all kinds of surprises, as I am well aware that the struggle with the Nazis is really only beginning; but I believed, as I still believe, that if the R.A.F. had gone down before the Luftwaffe during that great battle, our chances of continuing the fight from Britain would have become smaller and smaller with the passing of days. That victory seemed to me to show clearly that we could safely count upon continu-

ing to build up our air force until it surpassed the Luftwaffe in numbers; and because I believe that in this war the final decision will rest in air strength, I feel that the R.A.F. made our eventual victory certain. It has assuredly made it possible for us to proceed to a very large extent with our normal duties.

During the remainder of the month of August, we often had air raid warnings in London; but the skies were nearly always clear, and I was never perturbed because, simply, of the R.A.F. who continued to enjoy contributory victories.

At first, some of us at the office were a trifle nervous when the sirens sounded. Following a pre-arranged routine, Miss Marks, our book-keeper, rose from her desk with a slightly strained expression in her dark eyes and quickly placed her more important books in the safe while my little secretary gathered up other important papers and placed these with the books. Still hurrying, they descended to the basement shelter and made themselves physically comfortable on the deck-chairs we had there. The buyer and his assistant remained at their work, feeling fairly safe since their office is in the basement; and the packers, also in the basement, carried on normally. I hovered about with an eye on the basement, but seldom went there.

After a few days, this routine was modified; Miss Marks carried her work to the shelter and went on with it while my little secretary merely paid a short courtesy visit underground and almost instantly returned. Finally, unless we actually heard aeroplanes overhead, no notice was taken of the siren and the only inconvenience we suffered was a partial difficulty in making telephone calls. I almost reached the stage of welcoming the banshee wailings because, during an alert, the telephone remained quiet and it was possible to work without interruptions.

If the day was clear and there were several air raid warn-

## FRONT TO BACK

ings we were rather delighted. It meant that the R.A.F. would enjoy good hunting. We were seldom, if ever, disappointed. We had bets on the day's 'bag'.

I shall always recall this period before the London blitz-krieg with some pleasure and a touch of shame.

I was about to leave the office one morning when I saw outside our door three great hefty Maoris asking directions from a pleasant-looking English woman who was evidently stumped in her attempt to help them. That she was charmed with these lads who have a natural courtesy and who looked very fine indeed in their New Zealand army uniform was obvious, and this apparently added to her pain in not being able to tell them where the rest of their party had made for. In a New Zealand town, all would have been able to answer the question, 'Where are the Maori soldiers stopping?'

They confided to me later that they did not think London people spoke very good English!

However, being a New Zealander with an odd smattering of the Maori language, I stepped into the breach and after greeting them in their own language, which caused them no surprise whatever, offered them some help. I had noted straggling lines of New Zealand soldiers going in a certain direction earlier in the day, and I managed to guide them to the building which had been arranged for their reception.

I then said good-bye, but they opposed so abrupt a parting and demanded that I should lead them to 'the hotel'. That was another little back-blocks touch; in their town which, as matter of fact, I know well, there is only one exciting kind of public house — but always called 'the hotel'.

I thereupon led them to the Bloomsbury local and bought them all a pint of good English bitter ale of which they had rather a low opinion, it seemed; although they allowed me to know this in a most charming way. Against a rule I seldom break, because I dislike the smell of liquor in other breaths

during business hours, I thought I might venture on a glass in view of the occasion. Alas, the wedge went right in, for Pehi, Matoa, Wiri and George insisted; and some time after this, we were all on the top of a bus making for the zoo singing Maori songs, the lads harmonizing perfectly and delighting the other passengers with whom we were soon on the most friendly terms.

I recalled my age when the various monkeys and apes, to say nothing of lions and tigers, received so much startling attention from my countrymen that nothing, I felt, could save us from being thrown out by the keepers if the entertainment continued. There was, too, some danger of missing my train, and so I took a taxi, and left Pehi, Matoa, Wiri and George to their fate which I knew would not be disagreeable.

In seeking for a flank in the British defence by grounding our air force, Hitler had failed. His airmen had fought with desperate courage and, apart from the peculiarly poisonous business of machine-gunning some of our pilots as they descended after baling out — justified, doubtless, for the pilot is of infinitely more value than his machine; but poisonous, nevertheless — the fight had been fair, as far as we could judge.

Another flank would have to be found, and found quickly, if Britain were to be subjugated. Having been soundly thrashed by men who could hit back and hit hard; the Luftwaffe returned to the customary roll of Nazi Knights of the Air. London, with its teeming and helpless population, presented a vast target, a target which it would be impossible to miss.

And London is very much the heart of Britain. If the morale of the London people could be destroyed so that a call to the Government: 'Enough — make peace!' were forced from terror-struck men, women and children; the flank would have perhaps been found, and our grand defences

## FRONT TO BACK

turned. Barges had been accumulating in vast quantities at the more convenient ports; and these bellowed across the channel: 'We're coming to get you!' As a terrorizing demonstration, the barge concentrations had a value perhaps greater than the air attack.

The bombardment of London, still continuing, offers no evidence to me that we are being attacked by a strong enemy. Had Holland been fighting us, the small Dutch Air Force could have attacked London without being able to avoid hitting one or two targets of importance, and, of course, slaughtering thousands of helpless civilians.

The Nazi Knights of the Air are proceeding to kill our women and children and to destroy so much we love dearly, because women and children, like famous buildings, cannot hit back. They expected to find a flank; they find instead a first line of defence of a toughness worthy of our grand airmen. In effect, even as they slaughter helpless Londoners; they are still hopelessly attacking the R.A.F., even when the sky is clear of deadly Spitfires and Hurricanes. The R.A.F. cannot yet give London complete protection in darkness; but they have given Londoners their own superb spirit.

Before ending with the story of my own slight experience of London under fire, I feel impelled to attempt a tribute to the Royal Air Force; but the impulse is a rushing torrent far beyond my ability to control. It is only a mere drop I collect when I dare to say that because these young men are of a good courage, I may continue my way along life without dismay, still under a Union Jack flying bravely. I am aware of my entire lack of importance, one of the millions of little men in the world who would like not to be disturbed; but perhaps on their behalf, if they will permit me, I may say: 'Thank you — and God bless you!'

## CHAPTER IV

BECAUSE attempts to prevent this book from becoming a sketchy outline of the Nazi war have not always been successful, I feel bound, before ending with some account of London, to offer an impression of the British people's attitude, as I see it, to the Mediterranean and African campaign and to other events which have failed to fit into the general narrative.

When British Somaliland had to go, we suffered some misgivings, but for once we could accept the official explanation of a minor reverse as perfectly just and not designed to hide a serious defeat. We could see that the collapse of France had made our position extremely difficult in the Near East; but we now look forward to the moment when that bleak fact may be ignored and left merely to adorn both our successes and failures.

We expected the Italian Navy to think discretion the better part of valour, and not to sacrifice itself in any courageous attempt to dispute our great naval power. However, knowing that effective sea strength is built up on bold action without reference to odds, we judge the Italian Navy accordingly. We enjoyed H.M.A.S. *Sydney*'s action, notably when we knew that *Sydney* is something of an antique compared with the fast and dramatically exciting *Bartolomeo Calleoni*. Surely it would be best for the Italians to navigate gondolas and sing baccaroles. They look very nice in gondolas, and they nearly all sing charmingly in light tenor voices. Incidentally, I fear we must admit cruelty to Mussolini's men in stationing Australian soldiers in Egypt where they risk meeting Italians; but there is something remarkably

## FRONT TO BACK

like British hypocrisy in the prayer often heard in Britain, 'Heaven help the Wops when the Aussies get at them!'

Mussolini's mission is that of the jackal, although we can allow that his brave soldiers, who won so resounding a victory over the Abyssinians with mustard gas, would kill the Lion with dash and skill if that beast is blinded or affected by broken legs and other minor disabilities.

We were, of course, deeply grateful for the fifty American destroyers, but almost as happy in the implications of the exchange; it really looked as if the Americans had decided that we, the Great British Empire, might not submit readily to the son of old Schicklegruber. There were also certain delicate touches about the exchange which appealed to us, notably when we heard that the old destroyers had not only been smartened up, but had also been furnished with all kinds of useful stores. Nothing seems to have been forgotten. I enjoyed the absurd impression that the American young men who had responded with so much effect to the President's cry — "The hand that held the dagger has plunged it into the back of a neighbour" — had secretly seen to this business. Of course, they had not; it was merely the same kind of young men.

Some people in Britain would be delighted if we could wean Russia from her friendship with the Axis, and despite the incisively worded snubs we receive at every attempt, the hope still remains that Germany and Italy will take a false step which will bring Russia down on our side. Two of our evening newspapers have shown some faint desire to play with Stalin and Molotov, and, of course, with Russia on our side much pressure would be relieved.

I prefer to have the pressure. I would rather see Great Britain allied to Germany or even united with Italy — and I cannot imagine anything more obnoxious at this time — than fighting side by side with Stalin's Russia. Adversity makes

strange bed-fellows; but to go to bed with snakes or to sleep with scorpions is never really advisable, or wise. Stalin's Russia is a foul thing, proved rotten in Poland and Finland. What possible good could Stalin's Russia be to the country which has bred the men of the R.A.F.? God is our refuge and our strength, and a very present help in time of trouble. We cannot have God and Stalin!

The torpedoing of the ship carrying the children to Canada, dreadful as it was, and truly hard to bear by the parents affected, shocked us less in Britain than might have been expected. We knew the risk the children ran; they gladly ran that risk; and the picture offered us of a boat-load of doomed boys and girls on a raging sea singing at the top of their voices, 'Roll out the Barrel', while bringing tears to our eyes, yet made us feel very proud indeed. We were also proud of the schoolmistress who was eventually rescued after drifting with some of the children for many days. She seemed just an ordinary kind of school ma'am; but I find it dangerous to permit my mind to dwell long on the picture of this fine woman telling a Bulldog Drummond story in serial form day after day even when chances of rescue became remote. Those days must have seemed more than *A Thousand and One Nights* to her.

Like all normal children, British boys and girls enjoy the prospect of adventuring on the High Seas and exploring new countries; but they are the cubs of very tough people who have not, and will not, run from the Nazis. If the children are not thoroughly spoilt by the love and kindness of their good hosts (which seems unlikely) they may, in the coming years, resent this organized flight from danger while Mum and Dad remained to face the bombs.

'At least send forth your women and children from the *pa* before we attack!' a British officer shouted to Maoris defending a doomed fort.

## FRONT TO BACK

'Our women and children will also fight!' came the instant reply: '*Ake! Ake! Ake!* for ever, for ever, for ever!'

The object of pity in the tragic story of the drowned children is surely the condemned wretch who ordered the firing of the torpedo, unaware, we must hope, of what he was doing.

The Dakar incident perturbed people in Britain much less than it might have. I found few to agree with me that it was actually alarming — not that Dakar in itself mattered, merely that it suggested the existence of stupidity, somewhere. No one seemed to think Mr. Churchill's explanation really adequate; but his popularity was in no way affected.

The idea of a coup led by Général de Gaulle at Dakar was a good one, perhaps even an obvious one; for there would appear to be evidence that the population were not proud of the Men of Vichy. That the French cruisers could pass through Gibraltar without the First Lord of the Admiralty and the War Cabinet knowing before it was too late to stop them, does not reflect well on either; but mistakes can be made, and this could be forgiven.

But between the passage of the cruisers through Gibraltar and their arrival in Dakar there was a long enough interval for careful thought. The cruisers were obviously manned by loyal Vichy men and probably carried spare parts for the battle cruiser *Richelieu* whose repair we would like to see indefinitely postponed; and the vessels might easily have borne passengers of sinister character eager to see France do the right thing by her conqueror and his pup.

It must have been clear that the two cruisers with their guns trained on the town could easily abort any de Gaullist rising, thus leaving the expedition the choice of two alternatives — to postpone the coup, or to press an attack well and truly home. Failure had too many serious implications to be risked.

However, it is not fair to judge the incident and to give a verdict of what looked remarkably like stupidity without knowing all the complex facts. Nor would any of us approach judging harshly if it were not for the bleak fact that our fears in the recent past have been justified, often much to our surprise. If the person in authority who sanctioned the persistent carrying out of the attempt was unaware that the French cruisers would almost without doubt take every possible step to abort a welcome to General de Gaulle with every prospect of success, it is to be hoped that his next error in judgment will be made when we attempt to storm the North Pole.

Owing to the great prestige won for us by the R.A.F. we were, luckily, able to live the Dakar fiasco down.

I have stressed so much our gratitude to the Royal Air Force that it may seem as if I am unaware of the Royal Navy. The truth is that the R.A.F. is a highly promising baby, the Benjamin of the family, even a doughty David; and that we pay the navy the supreme compliment of taking it for granted. It is almost impertinent to say that it could never occur to us to imagine the Royal Navy doing anything else but well.

## CHAPTER V

FRIDAY, September 6th, was a normal enough day in London with the usual alerts, the usual R.A.F. victory, and the usual end of forty or fifty Nazi machines, with consequent additions to our junk heaps.

In discussing London's position in the general war scheme, many of us had reached the conclusion that the capital would remain safe until the Nazis, desperate with frustration and hate, would let us have a mighty bombardment before throwing in the sponge, as far as air combat on a major scale was concerned. And it now seemed that something must shortly happen to relieve what we imagined must be a tense situation in the ranks of the Luftwaffe. Their losses had been too serious, and had given such poor results, that obviously something would have to be done to punish hated England.

Yet when I left London on that Friday evening, I never doubted but what everything would be much the same after the week-end.

The B.B.C. Sunday evening announcement of the attack of Saturday afternoon, and the heavy bombing on Saturday night, struck a grave note. 'Seen against the broad background of the war,' the announcer said, 'the attack must not be regarded as serious . . .' words to that effect; yet quite enough to let us know that, at last, London was receiving the serious attention of the Knights of the Air.

Still, I caught my usual train on that Monday morning, reaching London on time, finding everything on the line working normally, and the other people on the train showing no signs of particular interest.

Outside the London station, two obviously country

soldiers asked me if I knew where Madame Tussaud's was. It was a block or two farther along the road, and being on my way, I agreed to direct them.

'The exhibition won't be open yet awhile,' I said.

'It'll never be open again,' they said; 'it got a packet last night; that's why we're going to see it.'

Madame Tussaud had certainly 'got a packet' when seen as we approached. A bomb had evidently caught her in the middle of her motion picture auditorium which was now exposed to the vulgar gaze from one side. The stage was there with its garish decorations hanging in pathetic disorder, and there seemed nothing left of the usual theatre furnishings.

Yet seen from the front and from the other side, the big building still stood proudly and, apart from broken windows, there was no definite sign of Knightly attention. The windows in all the great buildings around had been smashed to atoms, and the scene was one of desolation. It was also, strangely enough, a little comic; as if crowds of bad boys had enjoyed a day with brick-bats.

The curious part about Madame Tussaud was that everybody I met seemed determined either to drive the old lady right through the earth, or up to the moon. Countless people who had not seen the damage assured me that she was now nothing but a few bricks, making it almost impossible to believe my eyes each morning when I found her still standing, her head bloody but unbowed. It is not unlikely that three-quarters of her will reopen before the winter passes.

When I reached the office, I found our people in what seemed a very bad way, even an alarming way. The girls were very pale and obviously nervous, and the men were hardly in better case. They seemed unable to begin their work, and stood together in small groups discussing their week-end experiences. That these had been truly awful was

## FRONT' TO BACK

soon clear. They had all been terror-struck, and their condition remained pitiable.

My position was extremely awkward. The week-end in the country had been quite peaceful. I had not sat crouching in a small shelter while Hell was let loose around me. I had not heard the continuous crash of bombs within a few hundred yards of me, nor had I seen the glare, or watched the flames, from mighty fires which might spread and burn me to death.

The experience had not quickly passed. Hour after hour it had continued on the Saturday night, only to recommence on Sunday night.

How could I therefore offer advice, or dare to suggest that whatever the Knights of the Air did must be accepted bravely?

Actually, feeling very officious, I did urge them to be brave. There was no apparent effect; they remained very upset all day.

I found others in the district equally shocked and distressed. 'Hitler,' I thought, 'is finding his flank. If this goes on, and it will, the people of London may not stand up to it.'

Our foreman packer, who lives in a highly vulnerable district, had suffered most. While his own flat building had not been hit, others near it had; and he was particularly distressed because he had been forced that morning to leave his brother and his brother's wife and children homeless. He seemed deeply concerned.

I felt bound to talk firmly to him, to urge him at last to try to cheer up the girls in the office. I pointed out that what had happened was actually what we had long expected, and that we simply had to take it bravely. London could be blown to bits, but the Empire must remain whole. I could only be firm on the one point. He must show a brave face in the office, whatever he felt.

I saw no result with the foreman packer; he seemed obsessed with the thought of his brother's homeless family. Londoners have the tribe spirit very highly developed.

Not for one moment do I suggest that what I said had any effect; I know it had not, because my position was much too weak; nevertheless hardly a week of the blitzkrieg had passed before all the people at the office had become perfectly calm and only a little bit sleepy at the beginning of each day.

The foreman packer in answer to a question early in the first week told me that his brother and his brother's family had found a home and were quite content. He did not tell me then, nor did he tell others at the office, that during the first night's bombardment another brother and his entire family were killed, trapped in a cellar.

This man has been an inspiration to me. After that initial display of alarm the first morning, he abandoned all fear, and has proceeded with his job without the slightest reference to the Luftwaffe.

At the end of the first fourteen days, I arranged to take two of the girls from the office to have some sleep at the farm-house during a long week-end, actually from Friday afternoon to Monday morning.

Having often been kept waiting by relations and other women over whom I had no control, I rather boldly determined that these girls should be ready to leave punctually. We proposed to leave the office at four-thirty, and by four, they were scurrying about in a high state of excitement. At this time, the foreman packer was on the pavement helping some carters to load a lorry with many heavy cases of books. Although the sky was heavily overcast and consequently perfect for tip-and-run tactics from the air, there had been no siren sounded for some hours, leading us to hope that we would reach the station without interruption.

Suddenly we heard a series of long drawn out whizzing

## FRONT TO BACK

sounds clear above the roar of the traffic and obviously very near. There followed two or three terrific explosions, and soon the air was heavy with dust and smoke. The two girls, laughing with excitement, rushed for the shelter, but paused half way there.

I went into the street to see what had happened, finding the air still smoky and acrid-smelling, and noting with surprise that traffic was proceeding quite normally. The foreman packer was now up on the lorry and, with the carters, was chiefly concerned in arranging the heavy wooden cases in their right places. It was impossible to imagine that he had not heard the whizzing and the explosions; I could see that he was still working in a slight haze of dust and explosion smoke; yet he himself offered not the slightest evidence that he had noticed anything extraordinary. When the siren sounded an alert a few seconds later, he and the carters seemed quite shocked.

A single raider had evidently come over at a great height and, shutting off his engine, had dived to something approaching bombing height. Personally, my first impression was of the amazing silliness of the proceeding. You had the miracle of the aeroplane flying at so great a height, the skill and training of its pilot, all the careful work which had been expended in casting, turning and fitting the bombs; and the result that afternoon was the instant destruction of one or two mean houses in a mean street and the death of three or four poor people.

In a broadcast a few days after the beginning of the intensive attack on London, Mr. Churchill told us that the bombings of the capital were part of Hitler's invasion plans. He assured us, while we shuddered, that several hundred self-propelled barges were moving down the coast to French ports from Dunkirk to Brest and the harbours in the Bay of Biscay, and he seemed to think that the following week, if

not the next after that, might be a very important week in our history.

Assuredly, the Prime Minister gave the impression that our naval forces would be capable of repelling the invasion; but I cannot say that the broadcast lightened spirits to any degree.

I dare to think Mr. Churchill was mistaken. In attacking London with all the fury the Nazis have shown, Hitler was feeling for a flank. Terror was the weapon he was using. The barge concentrations, while designed for a conceivable project, had the immediate object of emphasizing and multiplying the effect of terror. The intensive bombardment of London was the main attack, not, I think, a preparation.

Therefore, while the navy was ready and the air force decisively victorious, any suspected invasion could be safely left to the attention of the army, and treated with at least apparent unconcern. The Prime Minister's object was to prepare us for the inevitable shock which would follow an attempted invasion; the last thought in his courageous mind was to dramatize, and consequently assist, an Hitlerian threat; but apart from the fact that events have so far proved his fears groundless, it seems to me that he might have risked treating the threat, no matter how menacing, with complete indifference and reserved his wonderful and winning power for the more vital task of strengthening the courage of the Londoners.

I was in the little grocer shop around the corner a day or two after the broadcast when a young woman came in. With the coming of bombs to dear old London has also come much friendliness, and during the first week or two the old city offered more smiling faces than it has ever offered before. You could speak to anybody, at any time, as to a friend. Therefore I soon found myself chatting with the girl in the little grocer shop around the corner where the

## FRONT TO BACK

service is as attractive as it is painfully slow and rather nerve-racking. She was particularly intelligent, I thought.

Two nights before, she had been bombed out of her home. A sister had been cut badly by glass and 'Mum' had apparently been assaulted by a chest of drawers impelled by blast, and her arm had been broken. Their escape from death seemed miraculous.

But all I saw was a slightly pale, but smiling, face on a young woman so obviously cool, brave and unperturbed that I could hardly talk to her.

I said, 'You know you're very brave!'

'Am I?' she laughed. 'Oh, I don't know. It's what we've got to pay for soundly thrashing the German Air Force. Hitler is very annoyed with us.' Then more seriously, 'We can take it. We shall have to take a great deal more!'

I had heard some awful crashes coming from the Charing Cross region half an hour earlier; this girl who talked so calmly had been there when some bombs dropped.

'But,' I said, 'didn't you take cover?'

'I suppose I could have,' she said, 'but it wouldn't be much use after it was all over, would it?'

I found myself discussing the Prime Minister's broadcast, taking the view that I thought it tactically wrong; but, while admitting that she could see my point of view, she disagreed with me quite coolly.

'He believes that we can take it,' she said confidently. 'It shows that he has rather a high opinion of us, I think.'

She explained that her sister had been very disturbed by the bombing of their home and had become very nervous.

'But what about your mother?' I asked.

'Oh, Mum!' she laughed, 'it hasn't worried her a bit. She says she's going to fit all our new furniture with pneumatic buffers ready for the next.'

At lunch one day I was told that a number of bombs had

dropped in a busy thoroughfare during the morning rush hour, at about nine o'clock. A fully laden bus had been hit, and a number of young women, typists and secretaries on their way to their offices, had been killed. The street had appeared like a battle-field.

When I had occasion to go into the main office later in the day, I said something to the effect that this particular thoroughfare had 'got an awful packet'.

The book-keeper, nodding towards my little secretary, remarked, 'She was there'.

'You didn't tell me,' I protested.

'No . . .' she said, looking at me in some surprise.

'But weren't you very frightened?'

'Yes, *very!*' she smiled.

Then feeling that really she should make something of the incident for my entertainment she added, 'I felt rather a headache for a time, afterwards'.

She seemed to think the whole business unimportant; and yet she had actually been alighting from one bus when another, a hundred or so yards ahead of hers was struck. Her chief concern seems to have been to get to the office without being too late.

One day a week later I was dictating a number of replies to business letters when a resounding explosion occurred some distance away.

'Oh, my hat!' I exclaimed.

The little secretary glanced up at me with concerned surprise. 'Delayed action!' she said lightly, and holding her pencil and block ready, hinted that we might as well proceed with the business in hand.

Although the girls employed in our office spend most of their nights in small shelters, the only result I notice is that they have become highly expert about bombs and anti-aircraft fire. They can tell in a second what kind of bomb

## FRONT TO BACK

has detonated, whether of the delayed action species, or the conventional whizzer. Alerts, however, have defeated us all; we never quite know whether the siren is sounding a warning or proclaiming that the raiders have passed.

The Nazis gave their London blitzkrieg first rate publicity, with excellent results from their point of view. They were unintentionally helped in London, I thought. Judging from reports published in our papers, the outside world seemed inspired to regard the attack as a major German victory. Our friends were deeply concerned, and again there came doom-like echoes from the United States. One of our evening papers reprinted a long story cabled to his paper by an American war correspondent. The bold heading the story received — 'A MILLION AMERICANS ARE READING THIS' — called for attention.

Travelling home in the still uncrowded train in perfect comfort, I felt I might also read with the million Americans. I gathered from a note that the article had been written by Mr. Raymond Daniell, and I imagined it would give the same impression I had, that London, although a little frightened, rather disturbed and very sleepy, was carrying on almost normally.

Then I realized that Mr. Daniell was writing for an American newspaper audience, that he was designedly creating his effects with emphasis, making use of every fraction of drama he could seuse. Moreover, as a war correspondent with a bird's-eye view, he was bound to find much that was sensational and bizarre, unnoticed by our untrained eyes.

The article spoke of 'last ditch' warfare, and gave a brave and melancholy picture of Mr. Churchill leaving the ranks of journalism to lead the British people through a dark and awful wilderness to what might soon be their doom.

I thought the story very well done, but I felt I should

have been much more interested and infinitely less depressed had the heroine been Pekin or Omsk, and not our dear brave old London.

The middle-aged gentleman sitting next to me in the train must have sensed my feeling. Smiling very pleasantly, he remarked: 'I know — isn't it incredible?'

There was no objection, of course, to the story being cabled to interest American people; its author was plainly a friend of our country and had his duty to do; but what seemed incredible was the decision reached in that evening newspaper office to let *us* have it, to let us realize that although we hid every trace of grief, our tears were yet being sprayed on the American people. But leading articles in this evening paper at this time, and very well-written articles, too, occasionally equalled Mr. Daniell's story in pathos. One sensed a very earnest man with lily fingers playing the Sonata Pathetique on a Wurlitzer. One evening he sang a song of fallen cities — of Prague, of Warsaw, of Paris! — 'If London should fall!' — he wept!

Out upon that! If London should fall! Why should London fall? London falling because a bunch of utterly defeated Bosche airmen decide to rain on the lovely old city their bombs and their ugly young frustrations.

Why should the outside world regard the bombing of London as of military importance? It had none. It had none because our leaders were aware that London's only effective defence against night bombing was German decency. When that defence collapsed, and the world is well aware of its strength, nothing could save London from indiscriminate attack in darkness.

I have loved London for more than thirty years, but only in her pain do I feel *of* her. And as I watch from my office window the still mighty rush of traffic, the superb unconcern of the people walking with pain and death as they keep the

## FRONT TO BACK

old city humming heartily and gaily, I feel honoured to be here.

One morning as I approached the office, I saw that heaps of glass were beginning to occur outside each house in our street. This was a sinister sign, because these little heaps generally radiate from the centre of the piece, a demolished building; and I began to fear the worst, until, happily, the little heaps began to diminish in size, until our heap became quite small. The centre of the piece had been in a street running parallel with ours. Only four of our windows had been blown in, or out, but many other houses around had suffered severely and the general aspect was rather forlorn.

After I had settled down to work, an elderly man came along the road with a ladder and very carefully began to polish each of the old glass lamp globes on the ancient lamp posts, giving them the same attention they had received before their lamps went out 'for the duration'. Our window cleaner came to do his fortnightly cleaning soon afterwards, and polished what was left. He said his business was becoming 'worser and worser'.

The bombs which had blown out our windows detonated at about ten o'clock the previous evening at a busy corner. Many of those killed had been standing staring at the searchlights or watching the anti-aircraft shrapnel burst. In a neighbouring hostel a number of young men were killed by glass as they sat about in the main lounge.

The general effect at that corner was depressing, and yet interesting too. The old Georgian shops and houses had simply collapsed into heaps of rubble without apparent protest, while the big modern buildings, although suffering severely in their windows, had stood the explosion well.

The charming old houses of London have no chance; they seem to collapse at the slightest hint of a bomb. Presumably the cement between their bricks has long become fatigued,

leaving them dependent to a great extent on gravity. This makes their basements death-traps, according to what I was told by an A.R.P. man concerned with digging out people from bricks and rubble. It was almost safer, he thought, to shelter in the attics. He mentioned one man who came down with a house from the top floor and suffered no more injury than a scratched wrist while those in the basement had lost their lives.

There is an attractive target near the farm-house, attractive, I should add, to the Knights of the Air. It has no military importance whatever; if the Knights scored a bull's eye, the outcome of the war would not be affected in any way, but it would make these silly fellows very happy. Week-end after week-end, one or two of them circle over my village and sooner or later there is a long drawn out whirling kind of whistle and crump — crump — crump! go the bombs.

Upon one occasion, the Knights actually got to within two hundred yards of their target; but they had no luck: the bomb was a dud.

Upon all other occasions, their bombing of this target has been wild. If an aeroplane is travelling very fast and high, I understand that bombs will travel some miles before reaching the ground. Evidently, judging by their sound, two bombs, whizzing and screaming in the general direction of the target one morning at about four o'clock, passed a few hundred feet above my house. As they came, I was certain they must hit us; and when the whizzing ceased without much sound, I was certain that we would find delayed action bombs under one of the lawns.

Actually, the bombs swept about two-thirds of a mile farther on, one landing about a yard short of the back door of one of a small row of quaint old Tudor cottages in a neighbouring hamlet. Five of the little old houses, including the village store, instantly became rubble.

## FRONT TO BACK

Within a few minutes, the A.R.P. men, closely followed by two doctors, were on the scene, and those people in the hamlet whose houses had escaped rushed forth to lend a hand. For some minutes nothing could be heard, and then a baby whimpering down amongst the bricks and old beams gave a clue. In a very short time the eighteen people in the wrecked houses were extricated and on their way to hospital. Although they were all asleep in upstairs rooms, only two women were gravely injured.

Martha has assured me that one of them will be 'a 'opeless cripple' all her life; but this is a gloomy view to take, possibly because Martha belongs to a period before modern orthopaedics began taking an interest in the prevention of chronic effects from accidents.

The district was rather intrigued when it heard the B.B.C. announce that one Nazi airman had chosen a small hamlet in the Home Counties for his particular target. This was not quite accurate. We all suspected what the airman was after, our pet target, two miles beyond the hamlet!

My own village has now been ringed by bombs. Old and young cows have died suddenly; sheep have passed rapidly away; rabbits have fainted in fright; oil bombs have landed on a brick kiln and made a famous blaze; but, thank God, no human being in the district that I know of has been killed.

Nevertheless, the peace of a lovely quiet night in the country is far too often disturbed by these nasty boys in their aeroplanes, evidently too frightened to risk the London barrage. They circle round and round, sometimes for hours, before dropping their bombs, and eventually forcing country people to eat 'a bit of old cow' when a butcher's meadow has been hit. I find the Knights of the Air more disturbing in the country than in London; but then, except for an hour or two when I have remained in London later than usual, I have not yet gone through a complete night's blitzkrieg.

## A U T U M N 1940

During the first two weeks, our train service worked normally: but one Monday morning perfectly shocking things began happening to us on what is about an hour's journey. We began very well, but half-way to London we were ordered out of the train and forced into a queue about a mile long which eventually flowed into a fleet of buses. The bus carried us a mile or two, and then decanted us into another train which only went so far. I abandoned the unequal contest because I was in a hurry, and took a taxi. Nevertheless, the London Transport Company determinedly carried everybody else to London.

By the evening the damage — a few craters on the line — had been efficiently repaired, and all went well for three or four days. Then an immense crater apparently disturbed two or three sets of lines, tangling up all kinds of electric cables which have always appeared so tidily arranged. But the railway men were not perturbed; the trains were running again that evening. And now, November 14th, they are all going well, even regaining much of their old efficiency.

During those troublous days of travel when valuable hours were wasted in long pauses at stations and wearying waits in long queues for buses, everybody with the exception of, I should say, one in four hundred accepted the situation with cheerful smiles. This was not affectation. We felt we were showing the Knights of the Air that they might kill us, disturb us and even waste our time; but they could not begin to get us down.

Because many people have moved out of London to small towns and villages surrounding the capital, we now suffer very severely from crowding on the trains. We all pile into any coach we can find, and occasionally we are driven to find a few cubic feet of space in a first class compartment. The first class passengers do not usually mind a bit; they, themselves, are often lucky to find a little space in third class

## FRONT TO BACK

compartments; but one evening when I was standing half way along a first class compartment which was rapidly becoming like a sardine tin, a very magnificent middle-aged gentleman struggled in and, after eyeing us all with some disfavour, remarked to a friend following him, '*This* always annoys me! There is now no point in taking a first class ticket!'

My impression was that there never was any point in this particular gentleman taking a first class ticket, even with the support of money; but I felt much too subdued and amused to express the thought.

'Of course,' the gentleman continued, 'the railway company is bound to give space, but those who only take third class tickets should stand.'

This was terrible; not one of us sitting or standing had a first class ticket.

I thought of shouting, 'Third class passengers, 'shun! Give seats to gentleman!' But no one could have obeyed me. If the sitters had attempted to stand, they would have broken the legs of the standers.

It still remains great fun. I had had no idea how many really delightful people travel on London's suburban trains until now. We are all friends; and when something too awful happens and the train staggers in at 11 a.m. instead of 9.30, after detraining us and busing us many times in a variety of places, sometimes leaving us to stand with colds in our heads in rain for half an hour at a time, we later make the many diversions into one diverting incident as we relate the horrors which have befallen us.

When a poor old building comes down with a rush — yes, and perhaps kills some people in its fall — it is not long before a small Union Jack appears flying bravely on the highest peak of the rubble; and never, I feel, is the flag more greatly honoured.

When disaster overtakes a shop or small business, an immediate attempt is made to carry on somehow, somewhere, together with an effort to make a joke out of it. All the best jokes have doubtless been told: 'More open than usual' when all the plate glass has gone; and, 'Don't worry about us; you should see our Berlin branch' when half a shop has been wrecked — but I expect the bad attempts, delightful to their authors, have been ignored.

Outside one of those shabby little drapery shops which always seem to hide themselves coyly off main streets in cities, and in whose windows invariably appear old-looking and rather dusty stock, I saw a brave sign to mark its owner's determination to carry on despite wrecked neighbours and a few wounds on himself: 'Ye olde drapery shoppe Hitler no can stoppe!' In the gaping window of an oyster restaurant, not a very high class one, which had been moderately damaged were two notices: 'Eat oysters — the best nerve food!' and, 'Enter by the door, please; Hitler has been in through the window.'

A bomb landed near the great bookstall at one of the stations I use, blowing most things flat, without, however, affecting the working of the station. Within a few hours, the bookstall assistants, usually surrounded by vast quantities of handsome books and periodicals, stood almost indecently exposed behind a trestle table selling newspapers only. A porter had instantly placed a notice in the centre of the bomb crater — 'That man again!'

A bomb may arrive in the centre of an important street, making an immense crater, and exposing all kinds of mysterious and indelicate looking pipes, some of immense girth and nearly all badly smashed or fractured. I always feel when this occurs that if I owned that street with its pipes and mysterious workings, my immediate impulse would be to walk far, far away; and after saying, 'Well, that

## FRONT TO BACK

is that? I would make another street on a moorland somewhere.

But London does not work like that. Betimes in the morning after the bomb contretemps, steady looking navvies appear with pneumatic drills and other noisy engines, and after they have pitched a tent in which to shelter and eat, they calmly begin, without any sign of haste, to restore the street. Fresh pipes arrive to be slowly and efficiently fitted; and when all the pipes have been again arranged into unbelievable series, the earth is carefully rammed back, blocks are fitted into place, and perfect tidiness restored. Half way through the business another bomb may have arrived; but this does not affect the main intention; and the work continues. On they go steadily, and with a rather remarkable lack of speed. The pipes are restored so that they may last for centuries; the possibility, even probability, that their work may be destroyed with one fell crash within hours, days or weeks, is not considered.

As a matter of fact, peacetime London always seemed to be undergoing operations for viscera trouble; bomb accidents on the roads hardly make very much difference.

Because the battle is watched by so many people who are of it, who suffer in it, and who see it from so many different angles, the famous Battle of London will eventually be told in a vast library of books. Although still being fought, the crisis has passed, I think; and the victory most certainly awaits the people of London, the rich and poor alike, for all show supreme courage. The world may see a battered old city; but its people will know that the spirit of London was built up to immortal strength even while they watched the precious legacy from the centuries succumbing in the poisoned air.

It is impossible for me to tell more than a little of what I have seen, or know, in a concluding chapter.

I think I like best the story of the famous bomb which threatened St. Paul's Cathedral. This projectile, a sinister engine of destruction if ever there was one, varied in size and weight during the amazing race it was running with the Bomb Disposal Squad. Sometimes it was merely a five hundred-pounder; often it reached the weight of a thousand pounds; and a naval officer told me, admittedly after two gins and lime, that it weighed a ton. Then, according to one paper, it had plunged its way right down into the ooze beneath London's surface where it had turned its menacing head and was slowly creeping to a suitable point under the west end foundations of the great church where it proposed to burst with awful effect.

After it there raced at the speed of an inch or so an hour the Bomb Disposal Squad, while London watched with baited breath. The officer in command of the squad became a public figure, and it is certain that he was the subject of many prayers offered up by many good people. Eventually the bomb was gripped and forced to pause. Slowly, but surely, it was compelled to reverse until it was possible to grip it with a crane and to load it on a lorry which was soon racing through cleared streets accompanied by shrieking sirens to Hackney Marshes where the bomb went sky high.

London breathed a sigh of relief; and Mr. Anthony Eden sent word through to the Bomb Disposal Squad that their action 'was in keeping with the highest traditions of the service'. If Mr. Eden had said, 'Good show, chaps!' he would not have been more original.

London's transport problems were considerably relieved by the arrival from the provinces of many additional buses. These looked very nice indeed, but the fancy work about them in the way of brass knobs on the seat-backs, and other odd bits of unusual decoration, helped them in no way with

## FRONT TO BACK

the London Transport bus crews used to the proud efficiency of their own vehicles.

'Where did this come from?' I asked a conductor one morning as I was travelling on a green bus whose driver seemed bent in shame over an engine which sounded like a coffee machine.

'From Dorset!' said the conductor with bitter contempt; 'I wish it had stopped there. It's wicked,' he went on — 'wicked! The bloke wot made this one should make two more, and swaller bofe!'

I learnt a new expression at that second when a gay old Cockney woman sitting near said with a delightful grin, 'Don't take any notice of him, Guv'nor; he's got dugout nerves!'

When the Duchess of York was forced to abandon a life which at least gave her occasional respite from the tedium of royal duty, and to become our Queen, it is unlikely that she anticipated the wonderful days she is now living. Nor could we have hoped to find in our Queen so very great a comfort. There is now apparent in London an amazing unity — thousands and thousand of grand London women who, always clad in a mantle of poverty and now assaulted with inhuman ferocity, rise up and shine in the beauty of courage to meet their lovely Queen as a friend.

'But how on earth, Mrs. Smith, will you get your week's washing done — with no water and no gas?'

'Oh, Your Majesty, Bill carries the water in his barrer; and 'Enery has cut a petrol tin in 'alf, and — ' with a shriek of delight — 'there ain't no scarcity of old wool, Your Majesty, and plenty of old bricks to set the copper on!'

Day after day, down to the poorest and most dangerous areas goes our lovely little Queen; Hitler can't stop her. In fact, Hitler has done her some service with her people by attempting to blow up her own home.

'Ain't she lovely?' say the East London women.

London's answer, made in diverse terms of expression, comes in a variety of accents, but is the same whole-hearted affirmative if a shade hoarse with emotion or hesitant with tears. 'Not 'arf!' means no less than the quiet 'Why, of course!' or the smarter, 'Most definitely!'. While, 'I'll say she is!' or 'Too right!' only *sound* more enthusiastic than 'Well, I think so.'

Mrs. Howard, who keeps our old house very clean, has always boasted that Hitler would not keep *her* from sleeping in her own flat bedroom. But her courage flew when she was awokened in the night by a chunk of bomb-casing entering her room through the window and impaling an 'enlargement' of her husband's late father where it hung on the wall.

This was enough for Mrs. Howard. She now goes each evening, with about a thousand others, to an immense basement shelter under the new chief Masonic Lodge building, and here she is very comfortable indeed.

'But, Mrs. Howard,' I said when she told me of this plan, 'aren't you disturbed by snorers?'

'No,' she said, 'you see the Grand Secretary is on duty nearly every night, and he quietly walks up and down. If any lady or gentleman snores, he gently taps them on the shoulder; and they turn over.'

Never, I feel, has a Grand Secretary been grander.

The war has imposed many lessons in the business of destroying life; it may, happily, end by destroying itself; but at least we may now see that its pain is not always destructive. Without doubt it has brought out the best in the British people; certainly, we may now look our forebears in the eye.

We have always respected and liked our young King, who is not, actually, so very young; but the war has given him a peculiar position which it is impossible to define. More than ever before, a King of Great Britain has become a symbol of

## FRONT TO BACK

the genius of the British people. Statesmen and leaders may reach the supreme heights of eloquence; their brilliance and ability may demand that we follow; but the King who has, thank God, no eloquence, who is a quiet man, is, simply, one of us in so peculiar and precious a sense that words assume impertinence if used to define it.

There may be bathos, even anti-climax, in the story I read in one of the papers, or heard over the air, of the King standing at the edge of a London dock. The foul grey water was below him with its oil-stained surface bearing odd bits of garbage from the great steamers around. Turning to the Press photographers and news-reel men, compelled so often to photograph him in his performance of conventional duties, he said, 'I expect you would like to see me dive in here!'

